PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 323

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1998–99

COMPRISING PERIOD
11 January—21 January 1999

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11 January 1999

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 323**

SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 1998–99

House of Commons

Monday 11 January 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Welfare Reform

1. **Mr. Paul Clark** (Gillingham): What recent representations he has received over his proposals for welfare reform. [63182]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We have received numerous representations on our recent proposals for reform towards our central aim of work for those who can and security for those who cannot.

Mr. Clark: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. I draw his attention to the issue of security in retirement years. My constituents' main concern is that they have sufficient pension rights for a secure retirement. Thirty thousand of my constituents in Gillingham and the Medway towns are aged over 65 and living on means-tested benefits to help to supplement their income. What proposals does my right hon. Friend have to ensure that future pensioners will not have to rely on means-tested benefits for security in their later years?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right: one of the scandals that we inherited is that many pensioners are living on such low incomes that they depend on income support and other benefits. Part of the rationale behind my proposals for reforming pensions, which I announced to the House on 15 December last year, is to ensure that people who work throughout their life will make a worthwhile saving towards their pension. The result of my proposals—particularly for those who earn £9,000 a year or less, for whom we have doubled the rate at which their pension will accrue—is that people who work throughout their life will retire on an income sufficient to raise them above benefit levels, a laudable aim which should have been achieved years ago.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, under his proposals for a minimum pension guarantee, those who suffer will be people who prudently save, because they will receive nothing from welfare, whereas those who spend everything will receive the maximum amount from the state? Does he think that it is fair for that to continue?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is on to a good point. If he read the pension proposals that I made at the end of last year, he would know that the Government are considering how we can improve that situation. Before Conservative Members get too excited, I point out that, for 20 to 30 years, people who have a small amount of money in the bank or a comparatively small occupational pension have discovered that they are not eligible to receive the help to which others are entitled.

We have made it clear that we are prepared to consider measures to ensure that the minimum pension guarantee will be available to more people. We shall do so by examining what disregards might be appropriate for capital and income. The hon. Gentleman is right to

mention the problem. It has existed for many years, but the Government are considering it and are prepared to tackle it.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): My question is about the representations that my right hon. Friend has received—and more than 1,000 people have responded to the various Green Papers. Does he recall that his colleagues have given answers stating that those representations generally support the Government's objectives for welfare reform? Is he aware that many of those submissions also make substantial points of criticism? If we are to have a proper debate, should not the Government respond properly and publish a Green Paper on those criticisms and worries and on how they intend to counter them?

Mr. Darling: I agree with my right hon. Friend that the Government should respond to criticism—they will—but I am wary of undertaking to publish Green Paper after Green Paper. The Government are anxious to ensure that we make progress and implement the reforms that people want. The consultation period for the pensions Green Paper, which is a matter very close to my right hon. Friend, finishes at the end of March. The Government will consider the representations that we receive and decide whether we need to publish a White Paper or whether we can proceed to legislation.

On disability and bereavement benefits, I have made it clear that the Government want to legislate in this Session. The consultation periods on those benefits have just ended or will end this week. In each case, the Government will respond to all suggestions and criticisms and make it clear what representations we can and cannot accept, but I can assure my right hon. Friend that the consultation is genuine and helps to inform Government decisions.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): On 15 December, the Secretary of State said in his statement on pensions that, under the new Labour Government, Britain's pensioners were at least £140 a year better off. How is that increase made up?

Mr. Darling: I was explaining that, as a result of the Government reducing VAT on fuel, introducing winter fuel payments—which are now being made—and making changes to the fuel levy, pensioners are better off by £140 a year. The Government made a commitment to current and future pensioners, and we are fulfilling that commitment.

Lone Parents

2. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South–East): What plans has for the training made available to lone parents. [63183]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): The new deal for lone parents is the first attempt that any Government have made to help lone parents to join the labour market. We recognise that training can play a key part, especially for those who have never been in work or who have been away from the labour market for a long time. That is why lone parents have immediate access to Government-sponsored training courses through the Employment Service, training and enterprise councils or further education colleges.

Dr. Iddon: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. We have had joined-up thinking and joined-up talking, but the new deal executive board in Bolton would like joined-up action. By that, I mean that if we are to encourage lone parents to take advantage of the training opportunities, child care facilities need to be in place sooner rather than later. Will my hon. Friend comment on that?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is right, but he must also recognise that, when one is starting from a standing position, it takes time to set up the national child care strategy, valued at £455 million, which will be coming on stream. Lone parents are already taking up the opportunities that the new deal is offering.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): At the last Social Security Question Time, the Secretary of State said that there would be an element of compulsion in the scheme. I subsequently had some correspondence from Baroness Hollis, who said that there will be no compulsion. If the scheme is to work, there must be an element of compulsion. Are the Government saying one thing to this House and something else to the other place?

Angela Eagle: No, I assure the hon. Lady that we certainly are not saying one thing to another place and something else to this Chamber. I think that she is mixing up the new deal for lone parents, which I emphasise is not compulsory, with policy work on the formation of the single gateway. As the hon. Lady and the House will know, pilot schemes will be established in July this year to set up a single gateway into the benefits system, and under those schemes an interview before one applies for benefits will be compulsory.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Will the hon. Lady therefore tell us what the sanctions will be in respect of the compulsory element? Will there be a withdrawal of benefits, a withdrawal of benefits for a time, or a stiff note from the Secretary of State? Is *The Sunday Times* accurate in reporting that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment are keen that the compulsory element should not only apply to the initial interview, but extend to the subsequent interviews?

Angela Eagle: A Bill will be put before the House, the details of which can be considered, especially in Committee. However, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that attendance at an interview will be a condition for receiving benefit in the single gateway pilot areas.

Benefit Reviews

3. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will make a statement on the processes by which an individual is randomly selected for targeted review by the Benefits Agency. [63184]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Targeted reviews are made on claims to income support and income-based

jobseeker's allowance. Cases are not randomly selected. The national criteria are designed to identify claims where there is a high risk of the benefit in payment being incorrect.

Mr. Heath: I am most grateful to the Minister for that reply. A constituent who is grievously ill and living in very difficult circumstances has been checked in respect of various benefits five times a year since 1993. I fully accept the need continually to review people in receipt of benefits where there are reasonable grounds for suspicion of abuse, but can it be right that an individual is randomly selected or targeted with such frequency when no adverse findings have been made?

Angela Eagle: I think that I am aware of the case to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I certainly do not wish to discuss it across the Floor of the House. The best thing would be for the hon. Gentleman to contact me so that we can discuss the case in detail. It is highly unusual for someone to be checked so many times every year for that number of years. That is not meant to happen. There is meant to be no more than one check a year for each benefit received. Targeted reviews are intended to check incorrect applications of income support; the all-work test would apply to another benefit and so on, down the benefits system. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman's constituent has fallen foul of some of those tests. If the hon. Gentleman contacts me, we can discuss the matter in detail in a more private place.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Can the Minister confirm that the Benefits Agency security investigation service currently has enough money to discharge its duties? Will she comment on whether it is likely to achieve its targets this year?

Angela Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman will know that we are doing a lot of work to put in place a comprehensive new framework to ensure that fraud is minimised, and that we are well aware of the importance of that framework. I can confirm to the right hon. Gentleman that we believe that all the fraud investigation work, part of which he mentioned in his question, is properly resourced.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Minister, in answering that question, should bear in mind the National Audit Office report last week, which said that, basically, the Government have made no impact on benefit fraud. More important, in answering the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), the Minister did not say whether the Benefits Agency security investigation service was properly resourced and would achieve its targets. Will she answer that question now?

Angela Eagle: The targets have been set and we hope that the service will achieve them; otherwise, they would not have been set. However, I am certainly not going to bandy about speculation as to what will happen in future. We are confident that the service will be able to meet those targets. I might add that we take the National Audit Office report very seriously indeed, but the hon. Gentleman needs to be aware that it involves the year 1997-98, during which we inherited Tory policies on all these things. I ask him to look at what we do with fraud in the years ahead.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Minister will bear it in mind that the Government's response to that report was to say that things can only get better. Let me put that previous question another way: will the Minister now guarantee that the Benefits Agency security investigation service will have enough money to achieve the targets set this financial year?

Angela Eagle: What I am saying to the hon. Gentleman is that we are resourcing fraud and all the many and comprehensive strategies—[HON. MEMBERS: "Resourcing fraud?"] We are adequately resourcing the fraud prevention strategies which we are now putting in place. We expect targets to be met. For example, just before Christmas we announced an extra £100 million for the verification project, which will enable all local authorities to do far more extensive checking on housing benefit and other benefit applications than ever before. The hon. Gentleman should wait and see what happens when we have been in government, so that we can get away from the inherited Tory legacy and start talking—[HON. MEMBERS: "You are in government."] We are in government, yes; but Conservative Members who pose about fraud need to reflect on the fact that the NAO report is a year in arrears, so that it covers some time when the Tories were in power.

Retired People

4. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): What further measures are proposed to increase services and disposable income for retired people. [63185]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Through our Government strategy for older people, we are co-ordinating a number of cross-Government initiatives to ensure that the needs of older people are better understood and that their quality of life is improved. A consultation paper, "Building a Better Britain for Older People", was published on 23 November 1998. The paper sets out what has already been achieved and, above all, what needs to be done.

Mr. Mackinlay: I acknowledge the initiatives taken by the Minister, and his Green Paper proposals, of which most hon. Members in the Chamber will be beneficiaries. I ask the Minister to agree that there is an immediate problem regarding the income of existing pensioners. Bearing in mind the appallingly low take-up of some income-related benefits, and bearing in mind the fact that the minimum income guarantee will depend on people getting income support, what will he do to spend energies comparable with those spent on combating fraud, on encouraging people to take up their entitlement, to ensure that they have an adequate income? Will he comment on Age Concern's report, which says that a modest but adequate income for retired people would be about £150 a week, and that only a quarter of pensioners are anywhere near that figure?

Mr. Darling: On the latter point, the whole point of the Government's long-term strategy is to ensure that as

many people as possible retire on an adequate pension. That is the rationale that underpins our approach, which is set out in the Green Paper published on 15 December 1998.

My hon. Friend is quite right. We have inherited a situation where far too many pensioners are living on a low income. We reckon that between 400,000 and 700,000 pensioners who might be eligible for income support or other benefits are not claiming. My hon. Friend knows that, last year, we ran a pilot project in nine areas to find out why those people were not claiming. We visited them; we telephoned them; we wrote to them—

Mr. Mackinlay: What is the answer? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Darling: The answer is not a laughing matter. Many such people are living in very difficult conditions. It is clear that some who did not know that they were entitled to benefits are now receiving them. Others, for reasons that are not at all clear, are eligible for benefits but will not claim. We do not know whether that is because they do not want to claim or because they receive other family support.

My hon. Friend asked me what action the Government will take on entitlement commensurate with that on fraud. We are planning to mount a take-up campaign later this year to encourage people to claim the benefits to which they are entitled. Take-up and fraud are equally important because every penny that is taken from the social security system through fraud is not available to those who genuinely need help.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The Secretary of State has pledged in the long term to link the so-called income guarantee to earnings rather than prices. Does he accept that, with two thirds of recipients already over the age of 75, the long term is a difficult concept? Will he therefore pledge to link the income guarantee to earnings at the earliest possible opportunity?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will recall that we said in the Green Paper that it was our intention to increase the minimum pension guarantee by linking it with earnings, consistent with prudent management of the economy. He will be aware that we have increased the money available under the present minimum pension guarantee so that the poorest pensioners receive the maximum possible help—£75 for a single person or £116.60 for a married couple. We are doing a great deal to help pensioners. On top of that, for the first time many pensioners are this winter receiving the winter fuel payment. The hon. Gentleman can shrug his shoulders at that, but it is real help going into the hands of every pensioner household—something that never happened under the previous Government. I understand the hon. Gentleman's reticence, because Liberal Democrats—at least down here in London—seemed to be against such a policy. I can tell him, however, that Liberal Democrats north of the border seemed to be in favour of it.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Although my right hon. Friend is rightly making pledges on the future of the basic pension, the second pension will be increasingly important in the next century. Will he guarantee that scandals such as that in the Bellings pension fund, from which a great deal of money was swindled seven years ago—many people affected still do not know what they will receive—will not be repeated in the next century, when people will be dependent on what they have paid for, and should receive it?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Over the past few years there have been several pension scandals. It is particularly galling for employees to pay into a fund and then discover, for one reason or another, that the money is not available. There is legislation on the matter on the statute book. If it needs to be changed or strengthened, the Government will address the problem.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): The Secretary of State referred to reductions in fraud. Will he confirm that the Government have not in any way backed down from their pledge to investigate, to the fullest extent, housing benefit fraud? What initiatives are the Government taking in pursuing the curbing of housing benefit fraud?

Mr. Darling: On housing benefit fraud, which is not the subject of the question, but which, if Madam Speaker will allow me, I shall address—

Madam Speaker: Order. I should not have allowed the question to be asked.

Mr. Darling: The Government announced just before Christmas an initiative to invest about £100 million in ensuring that local authorities that administer the payment of housing benefit make far better and more efficient checks. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) is right to say that housing benefit is prone to fraud; it has been for many years. We decided at an early stage to take action to cut such fraud by better checking of data. Local authorities are now able to check someone's entitlement with the Benefits Agency. We want better evidence before we pay housing benefit. The Government recently introduced another initiative whereby the Post Office will not redirect housing benefit cheques. That will prevent people from claiming housing benefit for one address while living somewhere else.

I think that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the Government are taking action across the board on housing benefit and, indeed, on fraud generally. We are already beginning to see results. One of the reasons why the growth of social security spending in this Parliament is less than half that of the previous Parliament is that we are taking such initiatives to ensure that accurate payments are made and fraud is cut.

Benefit Integrity Project

5. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): When the benefit integrity project will be abolished. [63188]

14. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement about the future of the benefit integrity project. [63201]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): The benefit integrity project will be replaced by a new system of review which will be sensitive to people's circumstances and fair, as it will

provide for awards to be increased as well as decreased in line with entitlement. We shall introduce the new system as soon as possible and expect to have it in place by April at the latest. Our priority is not to rush the change, but rather to ensure through consultation, in particular with the disability benefits forum, that the new system operates successfully.

Mr. Rendel: May I be the first to congratulate the Minister on his promotion to his new position? We welcomed the news that the benefit integrity project was to be cancelled, but surely it is unnecessary to wait until the new system is in place. The Secretary of State said in his original announcement that the project had been a failure and that it had caused great anxiety to disabled people, so should it not go straight away? The benefit integrity project should be cancelled today.

Mr. Timms: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations. We shall end the benefit integrity project as soon as we have a replacement that is acceptable. The Social Security Committee, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), has done some excellent work on the subject and has suggested—rightly, in my view—that the Department should be much more active in reviewing the benefit once it is awarded. It would therefore be a backward step if, as the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) suggests, we were to end all checking for a period and go back to the position that prevailed before last April, when nothing was checked at all.

We want to continue checking, but to make sure that we have a new arrangement. We have had one meeting already with the working group of the disability benefits forum which has been set up to consider the matter. That meeting was extremely useful, and I am hopeful that by April, and possibly before, we will have a checking system that commands widespread support, as the benefit integrity project did not.

Mr. Dismore: I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on his promotion. Many of my constituents with disabilities will welcome the Government's commitment to getting rid of the benefit integrity project. I look forward to its going in April, but there is some concern about what will replace it. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that whatever replaces the benefit integrity project aims at providing the right amount of benefit, which on review may mean benefits going up or down? Can my hon. Friend give my constituents an assurance that the Benefits Agency staff will be properly trained to administer the system fairly and effectively?

Mr. Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his congratulations and also for drawing attention to the widespread support for the Government's announcement ending the benefit integrity project. I can confirm that the emphasis of the new system will be on correctness—on making sure that the benefit paid is correct at the outset, and that it continues to be maintained correctly thereafter. That means that benefit payments will be increased if entitlement warrants it, and not simply decreased, as was overwhelmingly the case under the benefit integrity project. I agree with my hon. Friend that the training of staff to administer the new system will be of paramount importance. We are considering carefully how we can make sure that we get it right.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Does the Minister understand that the average number of cases going to appeal in my constituency show that three out of four people get the mobility component of disability living allowance under the benefit integrity project restored on appeal? What will the Government do about the people who lost their Motability cars and have now had that benefit legally restored, but can no longer find the money to put down the deposit on a car to replace the one that they lost?

I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench and hope that he will give me a better answer than the Prime Minister gave to the same question in July. I circulated the Prime Minister's reply to my constituents going to appeal, and they were not at all impressed with his answer.

Mr. Timms: I thank the hon. Lady for that part of her question which was good wishes and welcome. She makes a fair point that, under the arrangements put in place by the previous Government for the benefit integrity project, many reductions in benefit were overturned on appeal. I am pleased to tell her, however, that the rate of appeals that are upheld has consistently increased because of the steps taken by this Government to improve the evidence available to adjudication officers. Motability has put in place an arrangement that allows people to keep their cars while a reduction in benefit is under review. That has been a helpful measure. If it is established that someone is not entitled to the high Motability component, it is not appropriate to continue payment of that benefit and the car that goes with it.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My hon. Friend will be aware that any period of doubt about disability payments is of great concern to those involved. It is tremendously important that the Department does everything accurately. Is he totally satisfied that the information technology available and the new systems coming on stream are capable of handling the detailed work that is essential to the fairness of such decisions?

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance and sensitivity of those matters. We must ensure that we get them right. We undoubtedly need to introduce improvements in information technology and the Accord programme—the access to corporate data procurement project—on which we have embarked will enable us to do that. I am confident that increasingly we shall be able to offer the active, modern service to which the Government aspire in order to meet the aspirations of my hon. Friend's constituents and people throughout the country.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box and the announcement of the abolition of the benefit integrity project, which has been widely despised and has caused much stress to individuals throughout the country. Does the Minister have figures that show the administrative costs of running the project so far? What savings does he think have been

made, and will there be a ring-fenced budget for the training of staff, who will have to deal with extremely sensitive issues?

Mr. Timms: I should be happy to write to the hon. Lady with those figures, which have been published and are readily available. I agree about the importance of training, and we are paying great attention to training for the new system. I am confident that we shall have the resources that we need to get that right so that our checking system commands widespread support, not least among disabled people and the organisations of and for disabled people. The benefit integrity project manifestly did not command that support.

Pensions (Earnings Link)

6. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What plans he has to re-link the calculation of the state old-age pension with average earnings. [63191]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): As I announced in my statement on 15 December, the basic state pension will remain a contributory non-means-tested benefit, uprated, as we promised, at least in line with prices.

Mr. Corbyn: Does not my right hon. Friend understand that many pensioners are rightly angry that the Tory Government broke the link with earnings in 1980 and that pensioners have subsequently lost at least £25 a week from their state pension? Does he accept that means-tested benefits and private pensions are more expensive to administer and less secure for pensioners? Is not the best way to raise the living standards of the oldest people in our society to raise the basic state pension in line with earnings, as the previous Labour Government did, to ensure that we eliminate poverty among the elderly?

Mr. Darling: No, I do not accept that. Over the past few years, in addition to the basic state pension, many more pensioners have had rights to occupational pensions, private pensions and so on. If we were to uprate the basic state pension in line with earnings, in 2010 the cost would be £11 billion. That would do little for the poorest pensioners, while giving money to people who might not need it that much. As I made clear in my statement last year, our strategy is to do far more for poorer pensioners, who would have retired on benefits had it not been for the change of policy that I announced. As a result of our proposals, those who earn less than £9,000 will double the rate at which they accrue a pension. That is a better use of public funds. It will do far more for poorer people, who will see a real benefit and enjoy a decent retirement when they reach that stage.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Can the Secretary of State confirm that, so modest and, indeed, so feeble are his proposals for pensions, that by 2050 there will be 8 million pensioners eking out an existence on means-tested income support?

Mr. Darling: I do not accept that. Indeed, the pension proposals that I set out at the end of last year have been quite widely welcomed. The object of the exercise was to ensure that people who had worked throughout their lives would retire on a pension above income support. That is not the case under the present policies, which we inherited and the hon. Gentleman supported. The Government's proposals mean that most people who work throughout their life will be able to enjoy a retirement in which they will have a decent income to enjoy the years that lie ahead of them.

Pensioners (Poverty)

7. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What measures he has taken to reduce poverty among pensioners. [63192]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): We have reduced VAT on fuel and introduced winter fuel payments to help pensioners with their heaviest quarterly fuel bill.

As my right hon. Friend has said, we announced last month in the pensions Green Paper that, from April, we will introduce a new minimum income guarantee for pensioners of at least £75 a week for single people and £116.60 for couples.

Mr. Baker: I hear what the Minister says, but is he aware that many pensioners in my constituency—in Seaford, Polegate and other places—genuinely doubt the Government's commitment to dealing with poverty among pensioners? Will he look seriously at Liberal Democrat proposals to increase the basic pension by £5 for those aged over 80 and by £3 for those aged over 75? Does he understand that my constituents want a fair deal for pensioners from the Government?

Mr. Timms: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman about the Government's commitment. We made it absolutely clear in our manifesto that we would give priority to the poorest pensioners because that is the group which requires the most urgent action. The minimum income guarantee allows us to concentrate the extra help on those pensioners and offers to those on income support a substantial increase in their income from next April. We could not have achieved that if we had used the resources on the basic pension instead.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given the importance of avoiding or reducing poverty among carers who retire, will the proposed carer's pension take the form of a funded personal pension—which could be portable and flexible so that, when the circumstances of the carer changed, the value of the pension could change accordingly—or will it simply be a state-funded addition to the carer's pension?

Mr. Timms: It will be provided within the state second pension. We have proposed that carers will be credited with contributions so that, in effect, they will gain about £1 a week in pension for each year of caring that they undertake. It will not be a funded scheme, but it is a huge step forward for carers, which has been widely welcomed and is long overdue.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): On behalf of those on the Opposition Front Bench, I warmly congratulate the Minister on his promotion.

Perhaps, under pressure from Conservative Members, the Government are at last making a little progress, given that the Secretary of State has at least half acknowledged to my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) that means testing can be extremely damaging and extremely unfair. In that case, one might reasonably ask why the Government do nothing but extend its application to bereavement benefits, incapacity benefit, the minimum income guarantee and even to fuel payments and so forth.

Does the Minister realise that the present system is so perverse that, if he were an independent financial adviser who suggested that people on small earnings should take out a personal pension or save money where the return would be substantially negated by the loss of means-tested benefits, he would be liable for criminal prosecution for mis-selling?

Mr. Timms: I enjoyed that question. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations on behalf of those on the Opposition Front Bench and I can reassure him that the progress that we are making is not as a result of pressure from him and his colleagues, although it is substantial.

We acknowledged in the Green Paper that, under the present system, some of those who qualify for the minimum income guarantee achieve no benefit from their savings and that some people with modest second pensions do not qualify for the minimum income guarantee at all. A range of measures could help, such as some form of disregard on pensioners' income. In the Green Paper, we asked for people's views on the best way in which we can help. We want to give better rewards to savers and, unlike the last Government, we aim to present proposals—in this Parliament—to achieve that end.

Disabled People

8. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What representations he has received about his plans to reform benefits for people with disabilities. [63193]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Consultation closed on Friday 8 January. Two hundred and eighty-three responses have been received and are being analysed. Forty-seven of those responses came from Members of Parliament—including the Back-Bench Member for City of York!—but I assure the House that all will receive equal consideration.

Mr. Thomas: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his well-deserved elevation.

My hon. Friend will know from his own constituency experience that what many disabled people want is the opportunity to work. In meetings that I have held with disabled constituents, what has consistently come across is the often unavoidable additional cost that they would incur in obtaining work. I realise that it is early in my hon. Friend's term of office, but will he tell us what he intends to do about the problem?

Mr. Bayley: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind congratulations.

The Government's policy is that work, for those who can work, is the best provider of welfare. We are removing obstacles to work for disabled people by introducing the 12-month linking rule and other measures, such as the disabled persons tax credit, to make it easier for disabled people to obtain employment. We are also working with the Department for Education and Employment on the £195 million new deal, and on creating a single gateway to provide a single point for advice on benefits and employment opportunities.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): I wish the Minister every success in his new post. Will he take seriously the real concern, alarm and anger felt by disabled people whose benefits are being cancelled on review? During my weekly surgery on Saturday, I was visited by a woman and her child, who has only one small finger on each hand and one small toe on each foot. The woman had been told that there was no need for any disability living allowance-related provision of any sort.

The Government have announced that they will try to save £750 million on disability benefits. Will the Minister genuinely consider the problem, and recognise that many disabled people are greatly alarmed by the cancellation of benefits for what they see as no good reason?

Mr. Bayley: The Government are addressing the problem, as my hon. Friend the Minister of State made clear a few minutes ago. Replacing the benefit integrity project will create a fairer system for assessing benefits. It will allow benefits to rise in appropriate cases, as well as allowing them to fall, as happened under the benefit integrity project.

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on his promotion.

When my hon. Friend considers benefits for disabled people, will he pay particular attention to the position of medical staff employed by the Department of Social Security? The anger of a number of my constituents whose benefits have been removed is shared by the general practitioner who has treated them year after year and knows their condition in detail, only to find that a doctor who has assessed them for perhaps 15 minutes has decided that they can do far more than they actually can. It may even be that a disabled person was too ashamed to admit the extent of his or her disability, or that the doctor happened to catch that person on a good day. In many instances, people can do a certain amount on one day, but much less on other days. When reforming the benefit integrity project, will my hon. Friend give thought to the key liaison between GPs and those doctors who see claimants on a one-off basis?

Mr. Bayley: I thank my hon. Friend for his congratulations.

The Government are aware of the problem and are considering it. My hon. Friend should be aware, however, that a GP may view his patients' disabilities in a different light from the doctor employed by the Benefits Agency, who has a responsibility to establish, on medical grounds, whether a person is entitled to the benefits that he is claiming. That is the basis on which decisions are made.

As my hon. Friend the Minister of State has just pointed out, it is our intention to ensure that the right decision is made as often as possible first time.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): May I congratulate the Minister on his promotion to the Front Bench, although I should perhaps warn him that, at the rate the revelations are appearing in the newspapers, his rise may be even more meteoric than he expects?

One of the key features of the Government's plans to reform disability benefits is a cut in the number of people who receive severe disablement allowance. Today, of those receiving that benefit who qualified after its introduction in 1984, more than two thirds qualified at the age of 20 or over, yet in future, no one aged 20 or over will qualify to receive the benefit because the Government say that, at that age, they will have had the opportunity to see whether work is a realistic option for them.

Does the Minister accept that that would hit those disabled people in their early 20s who are still students or in training? Will he raise the age threshold to 25 to ensure that at least those young disabled people in higher education or training who are preparing themselves for the world of work are not hit or betrayed by that particular cut in disability benefits?

Mr. Bayley: I thank the hon. Lady for the kind remarks at the start of her question. She will be aware that many people have made representations to the Department on the disability reform proposals. Consultation closed on Friday.

The Government's approach is to improve benefits for those who are most severely disabled and for the poorest people. Our proposals for reform of severe disablement allowance will improve the benefit to young people by up to £25 a week. The other representations that have been made will, of course, be considered as we draft the Bill which will come before the House shortly.

Housing Benefit

9. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): When he expects to announce the results of the review of housing benefit. [63194]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We have announced a project to simplify the housing benefit rules and regulations and to improve the administration and delivery of the benefit. We are working in conjunction with local authority associations and further announcements will be made in due course. In addition, we have announced a small-scale pilot, which will examine the issues surrounding the under-occupation of social housing.

Mr. Kidney: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does she agree that the housing benefit system established by the previous Government can sometimes operate as a severe disincentive to work because of the steep rates at which benefits are withdrawn when recipients find work? Does she also agree that the Government's policies to be introduced later this year—the range of new deal projects and the working families tax credit—offer a powerful incentive to work for those who can work? Therefore, does she agree that it might be helpful if housing benefit could be changed this year, so that those changes could work with the grain of those other Government policies?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is right to point out that some severe work disincentives—what I call the hassle factor—are inherent in the current design of the benefit. People spend so long trying to get their housing benefit allocation right that they are reluctant to come off that benefit to try, say, a temporary job. In the review, we are looking to see how we can reduce the hassle factor and whether we can create more obvious incentives to make that often difficult move from benefit into work. I accept absolutely my hon. Friend's point.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Following the answer that was given by the Secretary of State to my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), will the Minister give a categoric pledge—an assurance—that there has been and will be no watering down in the campaign by the Government and local authorities to combat housing benefit fraud?

Angela Eagle: Far from watering down the campaign to combat that fraud, we are gearing it up not only in the fraud strategy itself, but in our fundamental look at how the benefit is administered. As I said earlier, we have already announced £100 million extra to resource local authorities to enable them to check much more effectively how they administer housing benefit. The hon. Gentleman should await announcements on some of the changes in the simplification project, which I hope will tighten the gateways to that benefit and ensure that payments are right first time and stay right.

Fuel Poverty

10. **Mr. David Winnick** (Walsall, North): What recent representations he has received over fuel poverty among the elderly on small incomes. [63195]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): We have no record of any recent representations to the Department principally about fuel poverty among the elderly, but, since January 1998, we have received 439 letters about winter fuel payments.

Mr. Winnick: Does my hon. Friend accept that elderly people suffer much distress as a result of cold weather such as we have had today? What the Government have already done—what the Tories refused to do—is very welcome indeed, but could Ministers consider whether there could be a more flexible arrangement for cold weather payments? I and, I am sure, all Labour Members, feel that it is quite wrong that so many elderly people on small incomes should suffer such distress during cold weather when we should be in a position to help them.

Mr. Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important subject. I agree that the introduction of winter fuel payments has been an important step forward. About £1 billion will be made available this Parliament. A total of 3.3 million payments were included in a computer run at the weekend, and we hope that the full 10 million payments will have been paid out by the end of next week.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the cold weather payments scheme is another important means of the Government tackling the problem. An interdepartmental group on fuel poverty, led by the Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), is considering a wide range of fuel poverty issues, including the arrangements for cold weather payments, and it intends to publish proposals in the spring.

Pensioners (Benefit Refusals)

11. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): What estimate he has made of the number of basic rate pensioners who have refused increased benefits to which they are entitled; and if he will make a statement. [63196]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We are committed to encouraging and helping more pensioners to claim their entitlements. The new minimum income guarantee will help in that respect. Estimates specifically of basic rate pensioners who are not claiming their entitlements, as opposed to pensioners in other circumstances, are not available.

Mrs. Lait: In an earlier answer to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), the Secretary of State referred to the mystery surrounding the number of pensioners who refuse to apply for benefits. Has he never met pensioners in his constituency who are too proud to claim and believe that benefits are charity? Would not it be better for the Government to stop attacking the insurance principle and increasing means testing, and to allow those proud elderly people to feel that they have contributed sufficiently to be entitled to claim?

Mr. Darling: I have been a Member of Parliament for only 11 years, but in all the time that I spent in opposition I never heard the Tory Government saying that they were against means testing. Indeed, I rather got the impression that they were in favour of it. When we made our announcement on pensions in December, we reinstated the insurance principle—the contributory principle—and we are making it absolutely clear that if people work throughout their life and pay their contributions they will get a decent pension in retirement. The reason for so many pensioners now having to rely on income support is that for the past 20 years the Tory Government did absolutely nothing to put pensions on a proper footing for the future.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons why pensioners do not claim the benefits to which they are entitled has been the fact that over the past few years there has been continual talk of fraud in the system? People have been made to feel that they are somehow not entitled to the benefits that they can claim. The Government have introduced measures of success that include take-up rates. If we can encourage people to claim, and measure our success by criteria such as take-up rates, we will ensure that pensioners get the benefits to which they are entitled.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right, and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) raised an important point—at least in the first part of her question—because some current pensioners who are entitled to income support are not claiming it because they feel that they should not be doing so, perhaps because they are too proud to do so. The whole point of the minimum pension guarantee was to ensure that the money we had available would go to the poorest pensioners. We are determined to ensure, by whatever means that we can, that as many people as possible who are entitled to that benefit receive it, so that they can sit at home and live in some comfort. That simply has not happened in the past.

Means-tested Benefits

12. **Mr. Julian Brazier** (Canterbury): What plans he has to reduce the number of families on means–tested benefits. [63197]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We are determined to do everything that we can to help those who can work to do so, which is why we want to modernise the structure of working-age tax and benefits; to create the right incentives for families; and to reward work while simultaneously providing security for those who cannot work.

Mr. Brazier: The Secretary of State, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), said that the Department was reviewing the impact of means-tested arrangements on pensioners' disincentives to save. Regardless of the outcome of that review, will the Minister confirm two points? First, will she confirm that the minimum pension guarantee will substantially increase the number of pensioners on means-tested benefits? Secondly, will she confirm that, under current plans, the minimum pension guarantee will substantially increase the number of those on small incomes who face strong disincentives to save?

Angela Eagle: I fail to understand the sudden concern about means-tested benefits. The figures show that, in 1978-79, 4.9 million people in families were receiving income-related benefits. By May 1997, at the end of 18 years of Conservative rule, 11.6 million people in families were receiving those benefits. I think that that is where the problem lies.

Child Care

13. **Mrs. Sylvia Heal** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): What plans he has to assist those parents wishing to work with the costs of child care. [63200]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Parents need access to affordable, good-quality child care to help balance work and family life successfully. We have already increased the help available for child care costs through in-work benefits, and the Government have introduced the Working Families Tax Credit Bill, which will provide for a much more generous child care tax credit.

Mrs. Heal: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Is she aware, however, of the particular difficulty of lone parents in finding affordable good-quality child care? In the Rowley Regis ward of my constituency, one in seven families with children are lone-parent families who have

to pay, on average, £15 a day for private full-day child care. Will she tell me what help the Government will give to lone parents in my constituency to solve that problem?

Angela Eagle: The help takes a variety of guises, the first of which, as I said earlier, is a new national child care strategy. That strategy will create many more child care places across the country, to ensure that affordable high-quality child care is available to all who need it. Secondly, the new child care tax credit, which is part of the working families tax credit, will replace the old Tory disregard—which was used by only 5 per cent. of people—and provide tax credits of up to 70 per cent. of child care costs. Therefore, not only will we make child care available across the United Kingdom to those who need it, but we will make it affordable.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): The Minister might remember that, at the end of 1998, the Government produced a White Paper on the family which brazenly declared that, on balance, it was better that children were brought up in two-parent families than in any other form of family. Why then do the Government seek to discriminate against two-parent families in which the mother chooses to stay at home to look after the children? Under the Government's proposals, those families will receive absolutely no help or money from the state, whereas all the other alternative forms of family will receive help with child care.

Angela Eagle: The idea is to make work pay and to give extra help to those who are low paid, so that they can go out to work and support their family, and so that they are more better off than they could ever be on benefit. All our policies are focused on that very clear aim.

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): It is clear that this Government are doing more on child care than the previous Government, who did nothing to address the problem. Will my hon. Friend consider the need to reassure single parents, especially mothers, who worry about what will happen when their children are ill? It is all very well having child care places, but the problems caused by a child's illness can act as a disincentive to going out to work.

Angela Eagle: Our fairness at work legislation will incorporate the European directives on family policy, which will introduce parental leave and family leave to allow for such eventualities. The Government are committed to more family friendly employment policies and, increasingly, employers are realising that it is better to allow their labour force to balance work and family more appropriately than the Conservatives' policies allowed.

Yemen

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): Madam Speaker, with permission I should like to make a statement on recent events in Yemen. There have been three separate developments affecting British nationals in Yemen since the House last sat. On Saturday, and again this afternoon, I have discussed those events by phone with the Prime Minister of Yemen, Dr. Iryani.

The most recent event was the kidnapping on Saturday of Mr. John Brooke from the compound of the oil company for which he worked, in the Marib area of northern Yemen. Our ambassador was in contact immediately with the Yemeni Prime Minister and Interior Minister to insist on full consultation with us on any steps being taken by the authorities to secure Mr. Brooke's release. This afternoon I have expressed to Dr. Iryani our strong view that the release of Mr. Brooke should be achieved through mediation, and the Prime Minister of Yemen gave me an assurance that no force would be used without consultation with us.

We currently have in Yemen a team of police officers who are preparing an account of the previous kidnapping. Two of those officers are experienced in hostage negotiation. We have made their skills available to the Yemeni authorities.

We have also been in contact over the weekend with the Government of Yemen about the five British nationals who have been detained there. We understand that the five men were detained on 24 December. Our embassy in Yemen first heard of the arrest of unnamed British nationals on 29 December and immediately demanded access to them, including through a succession of meetings between our ambassador and Yemeni Ministers. However, access was not granted until last Friday, when our consul-general immediately visited the prison in Aden but was given access to only three of the five men.

On Saturday, I stressed to the Prime Minister of Yemen the vital importance to us of obtaining access to all five men under detention in order to reassure ourselves and their relatives that they are well and being properly treated. Dr. Iryani undertook to make immediate inquiries and on Saturday our consul-general was permitted access to one of the other two men. Access to the fifth man is still being denied on the ground that he has Yemeni-British dual nationality. However, this afternoon Dr. Iryani assured me that access to the fifth detainee will be granted today or tomorrow.

On Saturday, I stressed to the Prime Minister that if the five men are to be charged, those charges must be brought soon. They and their relatives are entitled to know why they have been arrested, and the five men cannot defend themselves against allegations until they are charged. If they are not to be charged, they must be released. This afternoon, I sought and obtained fresh assurances from the Prime Minister of Yemen that all five men will have access to legal advice, that any charges will be subject to due process of law in open court, and that consular staff will have the right to attend.

I now turn to the tragic events arising from the seizure of 16 tourists in southern Yemen. Twelve British nationals, two Australians and two Americans were kidnapped by an armed group on 28 December. According to the Yemeni authorities, the kidnappers' key demand was the release of a number of Yemenis and foreigners arrested by the Yemeni authorities. As soon as we learned of the kidnapping, the British ambassador spoke to the Yemeni Interior Minister, Hussain Arab. He made clear our paramount concern for the hostages' safety. He pressed on the Yemeni authorities our strong wish that no precipitate action be taken which could endanger the hostages' lives.

The next day Yemeni security forces encircled the kidnappers and their hostages. There was a firefight, in which four of the hostages were killed. Three were British. I am sure that the whole House will join me in extending our deep sympathy to the families who grieve for those who were killed. The testimony of the survivors confirms more forcefully than any hon. Member can that all the hostages conducted themselves with the greatest courage and concern for each other.

There is still much confusion about how the firefight started and about whether hostages had been killed before the security forces intervened. At the request of the Foreign Office, a team of British police officers went to Yemen on 1 January. In close co-ordination with the visiting Federal Bureau of Investigation team, they are preparing a full account of what happened.

On Saturday, I expressed to the Prime Minister of Yemen the importance of full co-operation between our Governments in the investigation. We agreed that the best way for us to maintain sound bilateral relations was to work closely together in establishing the truth and in bringing the full truth into the open. It would be wrong to prejudge the police investigation or to anticipate what it may conclude about the handling of the rescue attempt by the Yemeni authorities. Let us be clear, however, that the primary responsibility for what happened rests with the armed gang who seized the hostages in the first place. Those responsible for seizing the hostages, and for the death of four of them, must be pursued and brought to justice.

I pay tribute to the British ambassador, Vic Henderson, to Consul-General David Pearce and to their small team. They have responded with professionalism and with total commitment to a succession of demanding events.

Two areas of public policy require to be reviewed in the light of recent events. The first relates to the travel advice issued by the Foreign Office. Our travel advice in relation to Yemen has for some time warned of the risk of kidnapping. Following the recent tragic deaths, our travel advice has been strengthened to advise

"against all non-essential travel to Yemen".

Following the recent kidnapping of Mr. Brooke, our ambassador has today met representatives of the British community to impress on them the need for heightened vigilance, and to discuss with them the implications for their safety of recent events. All British nationals are being encouraged to re-register urgently with the embassy.

Our system of travel advice is widely held up as a model of good practice by other countries. It already tends to the side of caution, although it is necessary that it should not veer to over-reaction if it is to retain credibility among the public. We are constantly looking for ways of improving distribution of that advice. We need to be sure that it is seen by anyone thinking of travelling to dangerous parts of the world.

[Mr. Robin Cook]

I am therefore inviting tour operators and other members of the travel industry to the Foreign Office to discuss how we can further improve the distribution of our travel advice. We hope to develop with them a voluntary agreement on advice to clients booking holidays to countries where there is a risk. We would wish such an agreement to include a commitment to notify our consular division when tours are being organised to dangerous countries.

The second area of public policy that we must review in the light of recent experience is how we can improve our support to other countries in handling the seizure of hostages. I can announce that the Foreign Office will appoint a police expert with experience in hostage negotiations as a consultant to the Foreign Office on counter-terrorism work. Our intention is that he or she will travel abroad to discuss the training needs of foreign Governments, and to offer advice on their handling of hostage-taking.

We shall also launch a global series of seminars and consultations to share best practice in handling terrorist incidents with countries around the globe. Last November, we held such a seminar within the G8 to pool expertise on handling kidnap cases. Now we must make sure that the expertise pooled at that London seminar is shared more widely with countries outside the G8. These initiatives reflect the two principles that must guide the conduct of our consular duty: first, that the safety of British nationals is our paramount concern; and secondly, that only we can succeed in securing their safety from terrorism only by close international co-operation in defeating the terrorists.

The whole House will wish to record its condemnation of terrorism. Kidnapping is a crime. It is the same crime whether it is committed for financial gain or for political reward, and it is as much a crime under Islamic law as it is anywhere else. I invite all hon. Members to join me in sending the firmest possible message to terrorists that we are determined to protect the safety of our nationals and to be robust in combating terrorism wherever it occurs.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The whole House was shocked by the attack on British hostages in Yemen. Our deepest sympathy goes out to the families involved in the tragedy. We are also deeply concerned by other events in that country, including the continued detention without charge of British citizens and the abduction of John Brooke.

On the events surrounding the abduction of the tour group, can the Foreign Secretary confirm reports that the families were being informed of events by the tour company rather than the Foreign Office? The tour group was abducted on 28 December. The rescues and killings took place on 29 December, and the Yemeni ambassador was not summoned to the Foreign Office until 31 December. If it is true that the families were informed by the tour operators rather than the Foreign Office, can the Foreign Secretary explain why that should be so?

On the detention without charge of British citizens, can the Foreign Secretary confirm that they were detained on 24 December and that the families were not informed until 29 December; and even then, again, not by the Foreign Office, which was apparently informed by the families themselves of what had happened? If those reports are correct, how did the families know about the arrests before the Foreign Office? What explanation can the right hon. Gentleman offer for that?

On 17 December, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister whether the Government had taken

"all possible steps to safeguard British lives and property at home and abroad",

following Operation Desert Fox. The Prime Minister replied:

"We have done all that we can to safeguard British lives and property."—[*Official Report*, 17 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 1102-03.]

Can the Foreign Secretary say what steps were taken, not now, but then? Do not the steps that he announced today give the lie to the Prime Minister's answer to my right hon. Friend?

The Foreign Secretary will be aware that on 31 December, I called for joint investigations into the circumstances surrounding the abduction of the British tourists and the events surrounding the subsequent attempts to release them. I pointed to the vital importance of establishing why the Yemeni Government acted in the way they did.

The Foreign Secretary referred to the team of British police officers in Yemen, but there are reports that it has not been granted the facilities necessary to participate fully in the investigation. Can he say what co-operation has been received from the Yemeni authorities and what part British representatives have been allowed to play in those investigations?

On 30 December, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary asking for a review of the way in which assessment of risk to travellers is made in the Foreign Office and the basis on which advice is subsequently provided. I have yet to receive a reply to my letter, but I welcome what he had to say about the steps that he has taken. Can he confirm that there will be a full review in the light of those steps, and that he will report to the House on the outcome of that review?

I also welcome what the Foreign Secretary said about terrorism. The whole House will join him without reservation in his condemnation of terrorism—but does he have the faintest inkling of how ill his words lie with the Government's continuing release of those convicted of the most despicable terrorist offences without any progress being made on decommissioning?

The last statement from the Foreign Secretary on the on-going situation in the Yemen was made on 29 December. Why has he not appeared on the media to deal with the issues in the past few days? The events have given rise, yet again, to serious questions about the way in which the Foreign Office has discharged its duties. Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that, when they have come to an end, he will review all aspects of the way in which the Foreign Office has dealt with these events and publish the results of that review, so that public confidence in the Foreign Office under his stewardship, which must be at an all-time low, can be at least partially restored?

Mr. Cook: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his bipartisan support for condemning

terrorism. Of course, we would very much regret it if it were the case that any relatives felt that the Foreign Office had been slow in notifying them. It is not necessarily surprising that a competent and well-organised operator of that tour may have known of the relatives and next of kin before the Foreign Office, but I assure the House that I am confident that we were expeditious and competent in contacting relatives known to us.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked why relatives of the five people who were detained were not informed earlier. I told the House that we did not know of any British nationals detained until 29 December and we did not obtain any names from the Yemeni authorities until last week. We have made it clear that we expect clear, swift notification from the Yemeni authorities of any British nationals who may be detained by them. As for contact with relatives, we obtained access on Friday to see those detained. Three of them were visited that day and the relatives' lawyer was phoned by the Foreign Office on Friday to give the results of the visit. I cannot think of any swifter response by which to share with them the information that was available to the Foreign Office.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked what action was taken after the recent confrontation with Iraq which might have a bearing on the matter. Our travel advice was updated on 20 December to warn those who might be contemplating a visit to the Yemen of the rising tension in the area and the need to keep abreast of developments. It is the case that, at first, co-operation between the Yemeni authorities and the Metropolitan police was not as close as we would have wished. I am pleased to say that the word from the Metropolitan police officers in the Yemen is that they are now receiving satisfactory co-operation from the Yemeni authorities, who have shared with them the results of their investigation.

As I stressed to the Prime Minister of the Yemen—I am pleased to be able to tell the House that he fully agreed—the best way for us to ensure that this matter does not become a matter of greater contention in our bilateral relations is for both Governments and investigating teams to work closely together to establish the truth and bring the full truth out into the open.

Finally, we are confident that the way we develop our travel advice is correct; no one has suggested otherwise. We are equally confident that we have the best possible information on which to base that advice. The criterion is simple: it is to safeguard the British population—their safety is our paramount concern. However, we are open to helpful and constructive points as to how we might improve that advice. That is why we have sought dialogue with the travel industry—to build better consensus and understanding on the criteria employed in putting together the advice.

Lastly, I turn to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's attempt to turn this event into a party political occasion. I have to say that those remarks were more demeaning to him than they were damaging to the Government, and I think that on reflection at a future date he will wish that he had not made them.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The whole House will welcome the two specific initiatives taken by my right hon. Friend on the tourist industry and travel information and on the advice about dealing with hostage-takers. As he said, it is of paramount importance that we have the closest possible co-operation with the Yemeni Government. Will he confirm that the Yemeni Government are now allowing the Metropolitan police officers to interview those hostage-takers who are in detention? What is his response to the reports in the British press at the weekend that over Christmas a camp was held in north London at which individuals were given military training that might be relevant to taking extremism and terrorism into areas such as the Yemen?

Mr. Cook: The Metropolitan police officers in the Yemen have not had access to the suspects currently under detention there. The issue is not clear cut and it is by no means clear that, if the roles were reversed and the police officers of a third country came to Britain to interview suspects whom we were holding under charges, we would necessarily grant such access to the investigating authorities of another power. Still, the Yemeni authorities have co-operated fully in passing to our police officers the results of the interrogation and also other parts of their investigation. At present, we are satisfied with the level of co-operation and I have pressed the Prime Minister of Yemen that we should maintain the fullest co-operation.

I have seen the reports about a training camp. The camp referred to was in north Wales, I think, rather than in north London—

Mr. Anderson: Finsbury Park.

Mr. Cook: There were also reports of one in Crowborough. There have been investigations into the matter. The training provided purports to be survival training and also martial arts. We have not established that there was any breach of British law during such training. However, we will watch closely to ensure that, if any offence is committed under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 that prevent conspiracy to commit terrorism abroad, the Act is properly enforced.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his very full statement. Will he accept the strong support of Liberal Democrat Members for the action that he has taken in respect of Mr. John Brooke and our shared concern for Mr. Brooke's safe recovery?

Regarding the British detainees, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that three conditions must obtain if we are to ensure fairness of process? First, there must be full and free consular access to all the detainees. Secondly, they must be made clearly and unambiguously aware of the charges that they face. Thirdly, there should be no obstruction to the legal support to which they are entitled.

With regard to the tragic events in December, and looking back to previous events in Chechnya, I welcome the review that the Foreign Secretary has established about travel information. However, will he examine two specific points? First, is there a case for placing a clear duty of care both on tour operators and on employers before people are put into positions of danger, or before bookings are made?

Secondly, will the Foreign Secretary examine the ease of access to travel information for the ordinary citizen as opposed to the tour operator? Travel information appears

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on the internet, but not with quite the ease of access that is provided by the State Department in the United States. It is important that the currency of such information be constantly maintained. The information on the internet today was last updated on 29 December. It does not take into account events that have occurred since that date, which might suggest to a member of the public that it was not current.

Lastly, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that every co-operation will be given to Dr. Iryani and the Yemeni Government in sharing expertise and information so that we can fulfil our commitment, which I am sure that the whole House shares, to stamp out acts of terrorism wherever they occur?

Mr. Cook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions and his support for our activities in relation to John Brooke. We have pressed for consular access to all five detainees, and, following my most recent conversation with the Prime Minister of Yemen, I am confident that we shall soon be able to secure that access.

I have made it clear that if there are to be charges, they must be brought soon. It would be wrong to detain any of those men without charges being brought against them. If charges are not brought, they should be released.

I am pleased to say that the consulate in Yemen has suggested a lawyer for the five men. I understand from the Prime Minister of Yemen that the lawyer will be given access to the men, and we shall certainly insist on their having proper legal advice on how to conduct their defence against any charges.

The hon. Gentleman referred to a duty of care on travel operators and employers. We can consider that and I would not rule out any way of improving our advice on safety for British travellers and workers; but I doubt that such a duty of care would be easy to operate because, as events in Yemen have tragically shown, circumstances in a country can change unexpectedly and swiftly. Nevertheless, we are anxious that our travel advice should be fully known to operators, employers and members of the public. That is why it is available by phone and on Ceefax and an internet website. We are happy to consider any other way of distributing that advice and we shall consider that when we meet travel operators.

Mr. Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath): I thank the Foreign Secretary for coming to the House and making a statement on the difficult situation in Yemen. I draw his attention to the fact that the families of the five British citizens who have been detained in Yemen were concerned and distressed because of the period between 29 December and 8 January when there was no access to the detainees and very little information was forthcoming about what was happening to them.

I thank the consulate service for the work that it has done since Friday in obtaining access to the men. Has my right hon. Friend had a full report from the service on the detainees' well-being? Has he emphasised to the Prime Minister of Yemen that there is a need for charges speedily to be brought and for a trial to be arranged—otherwise the men should be released?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend quite properly echoes the point that I have made twice—that the Yemeni authorities must release the five men or charge them. Of course, they should be charged only if there is sound evidence on which the charges can be based.

I understand entirely the distress that must have been caused to relatives between 29 December, when they heard of the arrests, and 8 January, when we were able to share information with them. I can only say to the House and the relatives that we shared information with them on the very day that we obtained it. We had no information to communicate to them before 8 January.

The consul-general has visited four of the five men. My hon. Friend asks about their health. The consul-general reports that they appear fit and well and he did not see any evident points of ill-treatment. However, my hon. Friend is aware that one of those four has complained that he was ill treated in the first week of his detention. We are anxious to obtain access to the fifth person to reassure ourselves and his relatives that he also is fit and well.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): While I fully understand that it is the Foreign Office's job to protect British citizens abroad, the Foreign Secretary must be aware of the danger of the Foreign Office acting as the emperor of the world when dealing with small and disorganised countries. He has this afternoon instructed the Government of Yemen to charge the five speedily or release them, but will he also make it clear that if, by chance, the five are found to have been involved in planning terrorism in another country, the Government will fully support that Government in dealing with them?

Will the Foreign Secretary also give a firm commitment that the British Government will do all in their power to make sure that any training establishment or organisation is dealt with? Although we appreciate that it is his job to help British citizens abroad, will he make it abundantly clear that if any of our citizens travelling abroad are involved in potential acts of terrorism, the Government will condemn them clearly and openly?

Mr. Cook: I plainly cannot make any comment that might be seen to have any bearing on whether or not there is any validity to the arrest of the five detainees, but on the general principle, British citizens travelling abroad are of course subject to the laws of the countries in which they travel. The objective of our consular support is to make sure that if they should be charged, they are dealt with fairly within the legal process of a country and that the legal process is fair and open to scrutiny, with adequate opportunity provided for British citizens to defend themselves. We shall continue to make sure that that consular duty is provided.

As for any links that may or may not exist with the United Kingdom, I remind the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) that last year we passed the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998, which made it a specific offence to conspire to commit terrorist offences abroad. Of course, we shall be vigilant in examining whether that may apply to any case at present or in the future.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Has the Foreign Secretary received any evidence, official or unofficial, that any of the kidnappings might have been related to the Desert Fox operation? Is he aware that many people throughout the middle east regarded the bombing of Iraq

by America and Britain as terrorist in character? Will he confirm that when the Prime Minister saw Nelson Mandela in South Africa recently, Nelson Mandela strongly condemned the attacks on behalf of the South African Government?

Mr. Cook: My right hon. Friend invites me to go over a debate that we held at length before the House rose for the recess. In response to his suggestion that the bombing of Iraq was a terrorist activity, I say only that we are absolutely confident of the full legal base on which we operated, rooted in Security Council resolutions.

In response to the particular point on which my right hon. Friend pegged his comments, it is clear from the statement by the Yemeni authorities that the principal objective of the kidnappers was to secure the release of Yemeni and foreign citizens who had been detained by the Yemeni authorities. That demand was made by the kidnappers, and the Yemeni Government are clear that that was the motivation behind the hostage taking, and no other.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid–Norfolk): Can the Foreign Secretary confirm whether any of the British armed forces or security forces are involved on behalf of the British Government in giving advice to the Yemeni authorities in dealing with these kidnappings, given their tremendous expertise? I relate this in particular to the case of Mr. John Brooke, of Hardley Street in Norfolk. The Foreign Secretary will be aware that, given the recent tragedies in Yemen, Mr. Brooke's family and friends know that anything that is done or said can have a deep and immediate impact on Mr. Brooke's survival.

What advice is the Foreign Secretary giving to British companies that have British nationals based in Yemen, who are obviously very vulnerable to such kidnapping and ransoming?

Mr. Cook: The whole House fully understands the deep anxiety that must be felt by Mr. Brook's family and friends as to his position. We shall certainly do all we can to secure his safe release. With that in mind we have, in Yemen and through my phone calls from London, impressed on Yemeni Ministers that we wish his release to be achieved by mediation and negotiation, not violent confrontation. I am pleased that we have been given an assurance that before any military action was taken, there would be consultation with us during which we could express our concerns.

Two police officers currently in the Yemen with the British police team are skilled and experienced in hostage negotiation. I have urged the Prime Minister of the Yemen to allow them to provide advice, and I believe that the Yemeni authorities could be helped if they were to take advantage of the skills and experience of those two police officers.

On the other point that the hon. Gentleman raises, there are some 300 British nationals in the Yemen. Many of them are working for companies with experience in the Yemen, and with bona fide commercial interests there. We are urging them to adopt extra vigilance in the light of recent events, and we are seeking to update our register of British citizens in the Yemen. We very much hope that those measures will succeed in defeating the attempts of others who may seek to emulate the events of recent weeks.

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): The shadow Foreign Secretary confirmed, not just today but over the weekend, his reputation for being unable to see a belt without hitting below it, and it greatly diminished him and the House.

Will the Foreign Secretary accept my congratulations on the statement that he gave the House today? It was a masterly statement, outlining a very fine set of steps, which I believe will improve our position. However, will the Foreign Secretary resist the temptation—which he has been offered here today—to conflate the holding of the innocent British hostage, Mr. Brooke, with the holding under Yemeni law of the five British citizens, whose mystery tour to Yemen may turn out to be a good deal more sinister than the shadow Foreign Secretary currently thinks it was?

Yemen is a poor third-world country, which happens to have the misfortune to be amidst the maelstrom of middle east problems and the rising tide of fundamentalism, without many of the state resources that ideally would be in place to deal with them. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will resist the temptation to equate the Government of Yemen with the terrorist gangs who are responsible for holding our British citizen, Mr. Brooke, at this time.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes a fair point that the Government of Yemen are faced with a very serious challenge from fundamentalists and extremists, who certainly have demonstrated a willingness to use weapons and to use violence. I expressed to the Prime Minister of the Yemen our full support for him in combating terrorism.

Our legitimate interest as a Government is to ensure that, where our nationals may be caught up in events such as the seizure of the 16 hostages, we are fully consulted and their release is effected in ways that do not put their safety at risk. As I said in my statement, that should not cloud the fact that the prime responsibility for what happened to those hostages who, tragically, were killed, rests with those who seized them in the first place; and that our condemnation of terrorism throughout the world must apply very strongly to those who put their lives at risk.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid–Bedfordshire): As one who has travelled to Yemen many times, and who narrowly evaded being kidnapped some years ago—I believe in the late 1970s—I have some understanding of the tribal rivalries and the fact that, in that country, the Government's writ does not go much further than the foothills. What I find extraordinary is the fact that Foreign Office travel advice for that country—where anarchy rules so frequently, and where there has been terrorism consistently, for decades—was not substantially upgraded after the bombing of Iraq. Perhaps the Foreign Secretary can explain why. He needs to tell us why neither he nor the Foreign Office took action after what we knew would cause considerable difficulty in the Muslim world.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Member speaks from experience of the country, but he is wrong in what he says about the

[Mr. Cook]

travel advice. The entire first paragraph of that advice was rewritten to draw attention to the tensions in the region. However, I must tell the hon. Member that at present all the evidence is that the seizure of those 16 hostages was prompted not by anything to do with Iraq, but by the detention of alleged extremists and fundamentalists within the Yemen. It was a Yemeni seizure, but it was also a Yemeni issue. In that respect, our travel advice cannot in any way be properly faulted.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I thank the Foreign Secretary for speaking twice over the past three days with Dr. Iryani, the Yemeni Prime Minister, and for his personal intervention, which has created a very important dialogue at a very high level of the Yemeni Government. His approach, which is to work with the Yemeni authorities, is the right one. Will he consider appointing a special envoy, accountable to the Foreign Secretary, who can go to Aden in order to co-ordinate the various British agencies that are already there; or is he quite satisfied with the way in which matters have been co-ordinated in that country on our behalf?

Mr. Cook: In the present difficult circumstances, it would be unwise to express satisfaction. None the less, our ambassador and consul-general are doing an excellent job and receiving access to the highest level of the Yemeni Government. Our ambassador has spoken repeatedly to the Interior Minister and the Prime Minister of Yemen, and as my hon. Friend has rightly said, I have spoken twice in three days to the latter.

I am confident that our contact is at the highest level and working well. If, in future, we felt that a special envoy would have a role to play, appointing one would certainly be an option. We shall certainly take any option that will assist us in ensuring that we safeguard the rights and safety of British citizens.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I welcome the part of the Foreign Secretary's statement on the appointment of a counter-terrorism hostage expert, on a retainer, to the Foreign Office; and the fact that the right hon. Gentleman has fence-built sufficiently to re-establish proper co-operation with the Yemeni authorities. Is not it a pity that we reached a point where that exercise was necessary?

Given that we have been sophisticated and robust in dealing with hostage-taking and terrorism in this country, and that Yemeni soldiers put their lives on the line to attempt to rescue the hostages, should not the Government's first reaction have been to defend and support the Yemeni Government in advance of any investigation into what happened, rather than allow the stream of criticism in the media with, seemingly, some official connivance?

Mr. Cook: We have been extremely careful in what we have said as a Foreign Office and a Government about these tragic events. None of us, as yet, is in receipt of the police investigating team's authoritative report on what may have happened. It is a matter of concern that an attempt—military action—to release the hostages was made without consultation with British authorities. We have very strongly expressed the view that we needed to be consulted before any such action was taken, and that we did not want any action to be taken that would put the safety of British citizens at risk. We regret that we were not consulted, which is why I impressed very strongly on the Prime Minister of Yemen that we must be consulted before any similar attempt is made in the case of Mr. Brooke. I welcome the fact that efforts to secure his release are proceeding by mediation and negotiation.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Are reports that the kidnappers were calling for the release of the five arrested men true? Is there any link between Supporters of Sharia—the organisation in London—and the five men who are being held in gaol? If there were a connection—or not—would we, in certain circumstances, allow a British official to appear in court in Aden either in their defence or for other purposes?

Mr. Cook: If we were summoned by either the defence or the prosecution to supply an official to provide evidence that was relevant to court proceedings, we would of course make the most careful response and wish to help the legal process. We would certainly want to be of assistance, where it was relevant, to the defence.

My hon. Friend invites me to speculate on two points which may, or may not, turn out to be relevant to any future legal case affecting these five people. I shall decline the invitation to do so. I think that the whole House would agree that it would be wrong for us in any way to comment on that matter.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Can any British tourist, British Council employee or expatriate feel safe when, as soon as Ramadan is over on Sunday or Monday, there is the prospect of yet more missiles raining down on Baghdad? Once upon a time, nobody was more eloquent than the Foreign Secretary on the effects of cruise missiles. If that is to be done again, what will be the effect in the Arab world?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend's question, as I am sure he would be the first to concede, does not immediately relate to the events that we have been discussing today. In response to his point, may I say that there are no such plans? If there were to be any such event, there would be a full statement to the House and that would be the time at which to review the matter.

In the mean time, we are clear that our travel advice to all those going to countries in the region reflects such risk as there is. We are clear that that travel advice is correct, and with the travel industry, we wish to make sure that it is fully distributed and fully up to date. That is the immediate task on which we shall focus.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): I thank my right hon. Friend for a typically comprehensive, competent and concerned statement to the House. With regard to his reference to the British police, will they be working and investigating separately or together with the FBI, which he also mentioned? When does he expect their conclusions, and to whom will they report?

Mr. Cook: I can assure my right hon. Friend that there is full co-operation with the FBI team, and both sides are sharing with each other the fruits of their investigations. I do not know precisely when they will report. We expect

the British team to return in the near future, but how long before it can submit a considered report is a matter for the team. The report will come to Her Majesty's Government and will be equally available to the Home Office and the Foreign Office.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): May I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend? Does he agree that after the tragic events in Yemen at Christmas, the impression has been created in some parts of the media that people set off to the wilder and more dangerous parts of the world on holiday with no more information than a few paragraphs in a travel brochure, but that in fact that is not the case? Responsible travel companies give full information to would-be travellers. They also up-date it as quickly as possible when they get new information from the Foreign Office. They warn travellers that there may have to be last-minute changes to travel plans and suggest a substantial reading list to travellers, so that they can be fully informed about the countries that they are to visit.

That being so, if there are any changes to normal practice arising from the review, can my right hon. Friend tell the House what plans there are to publish them so that travellers can continue adventure travel?

Mr. Cook: I agree with my hon. Friend that the company concerned is a responsible, established company that maintains full awareness of the travel advice from the Foreign Office. One issue that we are anxious to address in our dialogue with the travel industry is the fact that because we review our travel advice regularly, there may well be occasions where our travel advice changes between clients booking their holiday and departing on their holiday.

In our discussions with the travel industry, we want to make sure that those who book holidays to places where there may be risks are provided with a telephone hotline number or access to the internet website or Ceefax, so that they know where to look for changes in the travel advice and can check it before departure. We think that that is a right duty of care towards clients booking their holiday, and we are anxious to ensure it through an agreement with the travel industry, so that all clients have up-to-date information at the time of departure.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I agree with my right hon. Friend that our first thoughts must be with the families of the hostages tragically killed, the family of Mr. Brooke and the families of the men currently being held in Yemen. That is why it is important that we get to the bottom of what happened in the case of the hostages and insist that the men being held be brought to a fair trial or released.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should avoid the temptation, present in some sections of the media, for the matter to degenerate into some kind of anti-Yemenism? I do not ask him to speculate whether the following was the case, but if the Yemeni Government had been given information that British institutions or sites were under threat, the same sections of the media would be the first to criticise the Yemeni Government if they had taken no action. We owe it to a country with which we have long relations and which is attempting to establish, albeit imperfectly, a fledgling democracy, and to the Yemeni community in this country, not to allow an anti-Yemeni feeling to develop.

Mr. Cook: We have some legitimate concerns about recent events, which we have expressed to the Yemeni authorities. I have already highlighted two of those: first, that in the case of the first hostage seizure, military action was taken without consultation with us; and secondly, that we were not notified timeously about the people who had been detained by the Yemeni authorities on 24 December. None the less, I strongly endorse the general drift of my hon. Friend's question. It is important that everybody should recognise that the Yemeni authorities are faced with a serious terrorist challenge and that the people who are primarily responsible for the deaths that result from it are the terrorists themselves. That is why we are determined to work closely with the Yemeni Government to find all possible ways in which, together, we can defeat those terrorists.

National Health Service

4.21 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I should like to make a statement on how the national health service is coping with the recent sharp rise in the number of people falling ill.

First, on behalf of everybody in the country, I want to thank all the people working in the health service and local social services for the huge effort they have been putting in to ensure that everybody gets the treatment and care that is needed. They have done all that because there has been a surge in the numbers of people going to see their doctor, and an even bigger surge in the number of people calling ambulances and helplines and going to hospital. The sharp increase in the level of illness is confirmed by the increase in the number of people dying, which in some parts of the country has meant that families trying to arrange funerals face long delays.

The figures put together by the Public Health Laboratory Service from returns made by the Royal College of General Practitioners show that the present outbreak of flu and flu-like illnesses seems likely to be on the same scale as that which occurred in the winters of 1994 and 1996, although the figure may go higher. The figures reflect the increased number of people with flu-like symptoms who go to see their local GP. Until now, flu and flu-like illnesses have been worst in the west midlands and the north, but there have been sharp peaks elsewhere.

The demand for ambulance and hospital services has shown a much larger increase, with daily ambulance journeys almost doubling in some places. Both the Merseyside and the Greater Manchester ambulance services saw the demand for ambulances shoot up to more than 1,000 journeys a day, compared with an average of 500 to 600. For the London ambulance service, this new year was the busiest on record with more than 4,700 journeys, compared with a daily average of 3,000.

There have also been some tragic fatalities due to meningitis. I extend my sympathy to the families concerned. Parents are right to visit their family doctor to seek advice if they have concerns. In November, the chief medical officer advised general practitioners to refer suspected cases of meningitis promptly to hospital, and he will renew that advice.

The national health service is better prepared than ever before to cope with those illnesses, and in most places hospitals have coped well with the pressures that they face. In August, I asked the NHS to prepare itself, to strengthen emergency and ambulance services, to make best use of the beds available, to improve discharge arrangements and to prevent unnecessary admissions to hospital in the first place. It has done so. Almost 2,200 schemes are under way nationally, backed by the £159 million announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the pre-Budget statement. Those include £750,000 to improve intensive and high-dependency care in London; £200,000 for one-stop clinics in Walsall; £175,000 for better home treatment and care in Leeds; £140,000 for a community-based phlebotomy service in Gloucestershire; and £45,000 to help prevent fractures among the elderly in Kent.

In August, we also announced that GPs could this winter, for the first time, offer flu vaccinations to all their patients over 75, rather than confine vaccinations to particularly vulnerable groups. As a result, a third of a million extra doses have been given this year compared with last, and vaccine remains available.

We are tackling particular pressure points. Over the past week, those parts of the NHS that are suffering particular problems which could be helped by extra cash have been told that they can draw on the £50 million contingency fund, which is there for that purpose. In some places that will mean more high-dependency beds being provided to relieve pressure on intensive care beds.

The position today is that 35 adult intensive care beds are free and available for use. The situation seems to be easing, but it could get worse again if icy weather were to lead to a lot of falls, particularly among the elderly. The NHS cannot be complacent. It is not, and I am not.

I will not pretend that the NHS everywhere has coped as well as the public are entitled to expect. Such an increase in illness will always cause difficulties, but those difficulties have been made worse because of the serious underlying problems that we inherited. We inherited a rundown NHS with serious staff shortages. Many buildings are out of date, much equipment is old and unreliable, methods of working are not making best use of new technology—particularly information technology—and there are not enough staffed beds. The Government are getting a grip on the short-term consequences of those problems and are also laying longer-term foundations to build a modern and dependable NHS. Much of that work is already under way.

One of the causes of the shortage of nurses is the cuts that the previous Government deliberately made in the number of nurses going into training, which fell from 15,000 a year at the time of the 1992 general election to fewer than 13,000 when they left office, having fallen at one point to 11,700. If they had not made those cuts, there could have been an extra 11,000 nurses available to the NHS today. It takes three years to train a nurse, so the country is paying a heavy price for those years of Tory neglect.

This year, 15,500 nurse training places will be available and 2,500 more people are already in training compared with when we took over. As I have said before, we must also reform the system of nurse education and training, which the previous Government introduced in the 1980s. It has achieved some of its objectives, but its emphasis on the academic element has put off some potential recruits.

Many nurses, when they qualify, think that they lack the practical skills necessary on a ward. The transfer of responsibility to the education sector from the health service has broken the old links between individual hospitals and nurses in training, to the disadvantage of both. Many nurses and nurse managers recognise the need for change, so I hope to carry the profession with us—but reform there must be.

The previous Government refused, right up to the end, to recognise that there was a shortage of nurses. This Government recognise that reality and therefore training extra nurses is a major objective. We spelt that out in our evidence to the pay review body. This year, we also made it clear that the pay review body should give special attention to the pay of nurses in the lower grades. Like the nurses, we want reform of the present rigid grading structure and better career development prospects so that those vital staff have a modern, fair and flexible system for pay and promotion. I repeat my hope that the

independent pay review body will propose a settlement that is fair to nurses and midwives and which the Government will be able to implement in full.

We are also addressing the concerns of qualified nurses who have left the NHS. We want to attract them back, not only with better pay, but with family friendly shift patterns and a better and safer working environment. If we are to retain existing staff, recruit new staff and persuade former staff to return, we must provide them all with the modern buildings, plant and equipment that they need. We have already embarked on the biggest hospital building programme in the history of the NHS, and there is more to come. High priorities for more small-scale investment include the replacement of outdated and unreliable equipment.

Last September, the Prime Minister announced that the national lottery new opportunities fund would help to provide new and better equipment for the detection and treatment of cancer. He also announced that, from April, we would be investing £30 million to renew 25 per cent. of accident and emergency departments to make them better and safer for both patients and staff. Ambulance services will be given new control systems, new vehicles and new equipment. All those will help the NHS to cope better with winter pressures.

New methods of working will also help. We launched three pilot schemes in Newcastle, Preston and Milton Keynes to test NHS Direct, a nurse-led 24-hour helpline. The schemes have been a great success: providing advice and reassurance round the clock, they have been very popular with patients, and have had a positive impact in helping them to look after themselves and reducing unnecessary calls on other services. Over Christmas and the new year, NHS Direct pilots took almost double their usual number of calls—itself an indication of the upsurge in illness. After receiving advice from the nurse to whom they spoke, about half the patients with flu symptoms were able to look after themselves. That shows how the NHS is delivering new and better services, and it is being extended to the rest of the country.

With the special investment of £44 million that we have provided, NHS Direct has already been extended to the west midlands, where it took more than 1,150 calls in its first week of operation. By April this year, it will cover more than 20 million people in the west country, Manchester, south London, west London, Essex, Nottinghamshire and other places: over 40 per cent. of the population. That will provide a new and better service for patients and at the same time help people to avoid resorting unnecessarily to GPs, the 999 service or their local hospitals.

Finally, there is the question of beds. Under the last Government, the number of acute beds was reduced by 40,000 and the number of general beds by a further 23,000. In September I announced a review of beds in the health service—of the number of beds involved, the sort of beds and where they should be. Preliminary work for the review suggests, not surprisingly, that the health service needs more beds. Our extra investment in the NHS over the next three years will ensure that we can respond rapidly when we have the final report.

Then there is the question of intensive care and high-dependency beds. Soon after taking office, on the advice of the specialists in children's intensive care, I authorised a shift of extra funds from the paperwork of GP fundholding to children's intensive care, and the concentration of the service in regional and sub-regional centres, with special arrangements for retrieval of very sick children by specially trained and specially equipped staff. As a result of the additional investment, the service can now provide up to 300 children's intensive care beds, very specialist new-born babies' beds and high-dependency beds. The new system has been working well, but recently there was an unacceptable delay in dispatching an ambulance from Nottingham to Rotherham. In the light of that experience, I have insisted that each children's intensive care unit, with its local ambulance service, must review its arrangements to ensure that it is possible to stabilise and transfer very sick children safely and promptly.

Intensive and high-dependency care beds are vital to the treatment of many people who have had operations, as well as accident and emergency cases. They demand huge resources. Intensive care is not just a matter of a bed and some specialist equipment. To care properly for one patient for one day in intensive care can require the services of around six specialist nurses as well as specialist intensive care doctors, anaesthetists and others.

Previously, the overall level and availability of intensive and high-dependency care has not had the attention that it deserves. That is why the Audit Commission is co-operating with the national health service and the Intensive Care Society to carry out a detailed study of the operation of intensive and high-dependency care in the NHS. I hope that that will provide a sound basis on which to plan for better services. I am also reviewing the role of the emergency bed service and of the national intensive care bed register. None of that is a criticism of the people working in those services—more than anyone else, they want the system to be modernised.

It has always been a source of pride in our country that, when difficulties crop up, people rally round to help and they have certainly done so on this occasion. I thank them all. In particular, I thank Dr. Ian Bogle, chairman of the British Medical Association, for his repeated advice to the public that normally healthy adults should use services in a considerate and responsible way.

From next April, for the first time in 20 years the NHS will operate on a budget entirely set by a Labour Government. It will benefit from the first stage of our £21 billion extra investment. In the meantime, I know that people realise that, when so many people suddenly fall sick, as they have in some places recently, it is inevitable that treatment and care cannot be as prompt as at other times. I want to ensure that we provide the people who work in the NHS with sufficient tools and resources to ensure that the impact is much less in future.

Over the past few weeks, nurses, doctors, midwives, health visitors, cleaners, kitchen staff, managers, porters, ambulance staff, laboratory scientists, therapists, pharmacists, telephonists, clerical, administrative and maintenance staff and social services staff have all performed wonders on our behalf when their own ranks have been severely depleted by the same illnesses that are affecting the rest of us. Many of them have kept on working while "under the weather" themselves. Many

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have returned early from leave to help their colleagues. Others have cancelled leave that they planned to take. I thank them all. They have done us proud.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Although I join the Secretary of State in his tribute to the many workers in the health service for the way in which they have coped with the emergency, I feel that my first question must be: what is new in the statement? What in the statement is going to make the slightest bit of difference to those who are now lying on trolleys, in fear and pain, waiting for treatment? The second question is: does he really think, with his complacent statement, that he is on the same planet as those people waiting for treatment?

Does the Secretary of State now agree, with the benefit of hindsight, with what I told him as early as last September—that money for winter pressures in our health service is far too little and too late when it is issued in November? Would it not be simple common sense to allow our hospitals to know how much they will receive much earlier in the year, so that they can plan exactly how the money will be spent?

Is it not the case, as the British Medical Association has been saying along with us, that the obsession of the Labour Government with their so-called early pledge on health service waiting lists has made the current crisis in our health service far worse than it need have been and distorted clinical priorities away from patient priorities? Will the Secretary of State tell the House how many hospitals were continuing to admit routine waiting-list cases while patients were lying in pain on trolleys in corridors, with many forced to seek the help of relatives and friends to provide basic nursing care?

The Secretary of State has, understandably, been telling patients not to use accident and emergency services unless it really is an emergency, but at the same time doctors have been telling worried parents not to take any chances if they suspect that their children may have even the earliest symptoms of meningitis. Is not there a breakdown of communication in the Department of Health?

Does the Secretary of State recall that in January 1996 the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and, indeed, the now Prime Minister, promised the public that a Labour Government would immediately set up a trolley task force? What has happened to that task force? Is it stuck on a waiting list along with some of the Government's other early pledges? It is no good the right hon. Gentleman telling us that he has set up an inquiry into beds, when what he promised was an inquiry into the excessive use of trolleys.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has cut nurse training by 3 per cent. from the levels that the Conservative Government had planned for 1997-98? He made much in his statement of what he suggested were our reductions. Will he own up to having cut 3 per cent. from our planned levels in his first year in post? His belated attempts last week to wriggle out of the blame for the crisis in our health service will impress nobody in the light of that cut.

How is the Secretary of State's wish list of nursing recruitment intended to be met? Will he acknowledge the use that is even now being made of the private sector, and deduce from that that it is time to break down the ideological barriers that he continually sets up between the public and private sectors?

The Secretary of State mentioned 35 intensive beds. Where are they? Are intensive beds available in every region, or is there a concentration in particular regions? Why, in the national priorities guidance that he issued last year, is nurse recruitment not listed as a priority? Will he now, at last, abandon his ludicrous concentration on raw numbers on waiting lists in favour of waiting times, which are a far more accurate measure of whether people are getting a satisfactory service from the NHS?

I welcome the Secretary of State's good will on pay for nurses, but can he assure hard-pressed health authorities that he will make the additional money available and not expect it to come from patient care? Will he admit that it is time for a slightly more mature debate on the health service? *[Interruption.]* I am pleased that Labour Members are agreeing with that at last.

Does the Secretary of State agree that the problems in the health service have been there since its inception and that the extreme, and welcome, expansion of the health service, and the excess of demand over supply, have bothered every Government from Bevan's time onwards? Will he admit that the magic wands that he promised—or, to be fair, because he was not then a health spokesman, that the then Opposition promised—before the general election were not to be found?

Has not the time come for the Secretary of State to be more humble in his approach, when the nation knows that, although he went to the country with the slogan, "14 days to save the NHS", for the past 14 days he and his policies have flayed the NHS?

Mr. Dobson: I welcome the right hon. Lady's characteristic humility and lack of assertiveness. She asked what was new. I have presented the up-to-date facts, including the ones that she cited. I have given the House and, to the extent that our debate is covered, the people, the true and up-to-date position. That is something new, because, with Parliament not sitting, we did not have the opportunity to do that before.

The right hon. Lady seems to think that, because of the massive effort that people in the national health service put in to reduce waiting lists by 150,000 between April and November, they are somehow rendered incapable of dealing with emergencies and urgent cases in December. If the Opposition think that, they are barking up the wrong tree.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has asked me effectively to ban all treatment of waiting list cases. However, as she is constantly ranting on, there are large numbers of people on the waiting list who have serious and life-threatening conditions. We have made it clear, as we always do, that it is up to clinicians to judge who should have priority, including, in some circumstances, who should have priority for intensive care beds.

The right hon. Lady asked about meningitis. Those who are offering advice on meningitis to the public have a dilemma. As I explained, the chief medical officer has advised general practitioners to rush children to hospital if they have any concerns or suspicions that those children may have meningitis. Conversely, the chairman of the BMA—on behalf of the profession generally, not on my

behalf—has said that healthy adults, who generally are not as susceptible as children to meningitis, should think twice before seeking treatment. I do not think that there is any difficulty with that advice. It is certainly not a matter of the Department of Health speaking with two voices. Moreover, it is a silly, stupid, petty and party political point to suggest that the Department is speaking with two voices.

The right hon. Lady suggested that there was something wrong with being concerned about trolleys. When we were elected to office, we discovered that the previous Government had, quite rightly, established an emergency services action team, the function of which is to examine emergency services, to try to sort out emergency services and to plan for the future—which is what we have done.

I have never ruled out the possibility of relying on the private sector to provide additional help if units within the national health service cannot provide it. About a month ago, the right hon. Lady was denouncing me for not allowing such private sector involvement; now, she is denouncing me for allowing it. It would be better if she tried to introduce a little consistency into her argument.

In a factual question, the right hon. Lady asked whether intensive care beds are available in every region. The answer is yes—or the answer was yes when the service provided me with the information. It is quite possible that, in one or another region, there will be a sudden burst of people coming into accident and emergency and the available beds will be occupied. However, I was informed that every region has some intensive care beds. I might add that, once we started examining the matter of intensive care beds, we discovered that the previous Tory Government had never known how many intensive care beds there were in the United Kingdom. We shall therefore take no criticism on the matter from Conservative Members.

The right hon. Lady produced a document entitled "Ten Measures to Help the National Health Service". However, none of the measures dealt with paying nurses, who never got a mention in the document. When she suggests that paying health service staff can be done only at the expense of patient care, she causes great offence to those who work in the national health service, as those who are paid in the national health service are those who are providing patient care.

The right hon. Lady talks about the national health service as if it faced some unique problems. All I can say is that every country in the developed world is concerned about the future of its health care system, and that all the Ministers from abroad whom I meet tell me that they are rather envious of our system because it is a lot more efficient and cost-effective than their commercial, semi-commercial and insurance-based systems, all of which spend a fortune on paperwork. Our national health service—except under the previous Government's ridiculous internal market—does not spend a fortune on paperwork.

The Tory party had better make up its mind about emergency planning for the winter. The right hon. Lady is suggesting now that we should have acted sooner on the matter. Why was it that, when we made all our plans last winter, they were described in an official Tory press release as a public relations stunt?

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): The nation will be grateful for my right hon. Friend's statement. Given the years of neglect of the NHS, especially in nurse training, I am glad that we may now look forward to a future with more nurses looking after patients in the national health service. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, over Christmas, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) appeared to be more obsessed with opening up the private sector for NHS patients than with sorting out the problems of the NHS that the Tories neglected for decades?

Mr. Dobson: I certainly accept the points that my hon. Friend makes. We must try to ensure that the additional resources, in the various forms that I have described, are in place in the future. We must also try to make additional provision this winter for those areas that are suffering particular problems. That is what I authorised last week and those areas that can benefit from an immediate cash injection will get it, but many can not.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): First, the Liberal Democrats join in the tribute to all those who work for the health service in both winter and summer. The Royal College of General Practitioners and the Public Health Laboratory Service have confirmed that there is no flu epidemic and that, although the numbers suffering from flu and flu-like illnesses have risen, they are not exceptional for a winter in Britain. In November, the Secretary of State said that unless we had exceptionally bad weather or a flu epidemic the NHS could face the winter with confidence. Just last week, the Secretary of State said that the NHS is in crisis. What changed in a month?

Secondly, I have to agree with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and others who have said clearly to the Secretary of State for months now—as the Liberal Democrats have said for years—that the obsession with reducing waiting lists is a folly and should be replaced by concentration on reducing waiting times and improving the quality of treatment. Will the right hon. Gentleman now give up that Government obsession of last year and replace it with better targets for this year? Can he assure us that no one has waited on a trolley for a bed because that bed has been kept for someone from the waiting list initiative instead of for emergency admissions?

Finally, the Secretary of State tried to put much of the blame on to the Conservative administration of the health service, which certainly under-resourced it. With hindsight, does he agree that a Labour Government who came to power in May 1997, but did not commit additional resources to the health service until July 1998—14 months later—should share responsibility for the under-resourcing of the health service this winter? If winter announcements are made in November, four weeks before winter begins, anyone can see that they may be too late to be effective in a winter such as the one we are having. In December, the Minister for Public Health said that there is no rationing in the health service, but that does not appear to be true unless the Secretary of State can guarantee to the House that everybody who needs a bed will get one at the moment they need it.

Mr. Dobson: First, I do not believe that anyone has any great faith in the scientific accuracy of the Public Health Laboratory Service epidemic figures, including the people who assemble them—*[Interruption.]* For the

[Mr. Dobson]

purposes of this discussion, I am prepared to accept them, but if the definition had not been changed two years ago we would now be suffering what used to be called a moderate epidemic. We are not yet suffering a huge epidemic of the sort that happens about once a decade. We have confidence in the national health service and its capacity to cope, because in most parts of the country it has coped very well.

Secondly, we have brought down not only waiting lists but waiting times. During the period in which waiting lists have come down, the average time that people waited for treatment has also fallen, as has the number of people waiting more than 12 months for treatment. Unlike the Tories, we are not content with keeping only our own promises; we have kept some of theirs, too. During all the time the Tories had a target of having no one wait for 18 months, they failed to deliver on it in a single month. We have delivered it, and we are reducing waiting times.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) seemed to suggest that the extra money that we provided for the NHS somehow did not come in until July last year. He should cast his mind back a little. We found money for winter pressures for the previous winter. From 1 April, we found £1.7 million extra for the health service, and we have found another £250 million on top of that. In case the hon. Gentleman has forgotten his election promises, let me remind him that that is roughly three times as much as his party promised to spend on the NHS.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I join my right hon. Friend's tribute to those who work in the national health service, and I particularly welcome his reference to those who work in social services. What was new both this year and last was that the Government brought about much closer working relationships with social services, which, despite all the difficulties of recent weeks, have substantially improved their ability to care for people in their own homes on discharge from hospital. Have the Government had an opportunity to evaluate fully the impact of the winter pressures initiative either last year or so far during the current winter?

May I tell my right hon. Friend of my concerns about West Yorkshire, where there have been [illegible] difficulties and pressures? I pay particular tribute to those who work in the area, but the difficulties relate to some primary care services that patients have been unable to access. I recognise that general practitioners work extremely hard and have every right to their Christmas holidays. However, people have presented themselves to accident and emergency units in several cases because they have been unable to receive advice from GPs. Given the NHS Bill that will come before the House soon on the abolition of competition between GPs, might we consider future arrangements for GP practices to work together over holiday periods to provide back-up provision that would prevent people from presenting themselves unnecessarily at hospitals?

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend raises some important points. I do not have all the detailed figures for every part of the country, but I can illustrate the extra sums going into providing care for people outside hospitals by mentioning the money that has gone to the West Kent health authority, which serves the area represented by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. That authority received £1.1 million for extra packages of home care, and a further £500,000 for further nursing home beds. I trust that those sums are working just as well this year as they did last year, when the right hon. Lady's party described them as a public relations stunt.

My hon. Friend referred to primary care services. In some parts of the country it appears that when general practitioners took holidays around Christmas and new year—not unreasonably; they are just like everyone else—there was a build-up of people seeking treatment. To be fair to GPs, many who realised that that was happening re-opened their surgeries. We must consider that problem carefully for next year. People go on about the millennium bug, but the millennium humans are even more important, and we shall have to make special arrangements to make sure that the NHS can cope with the extraordinary holiday period that we can expect next Christmas and new year.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I have heard a bit of window dressing today, and quite a bit of sensible evolution. Even more, I experienced a familiar flavour during the statement. What the Secretary of State did not have to contend with was demonstrating junior doctors. I dare say that the modest improvement to the hours of junior doctors is one of the issues that has led to the other difficulties that the health service is experiencing. Ever was it thus.

I urge the Secretary of State to reflect on two serious comments. I welcome his commitment to reconsider how Project 2000 is working in practice. Saying that nursing should be a graduate profession had much merit, particularly for nurses in the community and specialist nurses. However, it may have discouraged some and resulted in disappointment for others who think that they are pursuing academic training for what is ultimately a practical task. Will he consider carefully nurses' education for the necessary tasks?

Will the Secretary of State look again at the resistance to flexible and local pay? Insisting on monolithic pay scales for the tasks that nurses do is extraordinarily unrealistic. Nursing problems in Newcastle are not the same as the acute recruitment problems in Surrey and parts of the south-east. Being so resistant to flexible pay was an error.

Lastly, I urge on the right hon. Gentleman a spirit of realism. Many hon. Members have made this point. The despair in the health service is hard to explain, but I think that too many people believed the rhetoric of new Labour that all the problems would be over and that there would be a massive input of resources when, in fact, it is back to the day-to-day task of trying to meet people's infinite wishes when all the service can do is meet their health needs.

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Lady made one sensible point and one daft one. She is right to say that we need to review nurse education and training, not because we want to shift away from the improvements and achievements that have resulted from some aspects of Project 2000, but because its disadvantages are beginning to outweigh its advantages. I want a system that keeps the advantages and dispenses with the disadvantages. I want to discuss that with those responsible for nurse training and for representing nurses, and with the NHS as an employer, so that we get it right this time.

On local pay, the most popular thing that I ever said to the Royal College of Nursing was that we would get rid of the daft system of topping up the last bit of pay by local bargaining. It drove everyone mad and gave no one any worthwhile money.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): May I say to my right hon. Friend, to his face and bluntly, that his stewardship has been very good and that he should not be fazed by attacks from Her Majesty's Opposition, who had 18 years to put right the many problems in our still great national health service? Will he give more detail of the new money that he and his ministerial colleagues have put into our health service since he took office? Will he and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales visit my constituency and the Deeside community hospital, Dobshill hospital and Penyffordd hospital to see the wonderful contribution of nurses in my constituency?

Mr. Dobson: I hope that my hon. Friend will not take offence, but I try my very best to get out of my office at least once a week to visit parts of the health service, and at the end of this week I am supposed to go to Swansea. I do not think that I will make two visits to Wales in one week, but I will bear it in mind, as I am sure will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. I share my hon. Friend's view that most people are reasonable folk and realise that all the things that were done wrong over 18 years cannot be put right in 18 months.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The Secretary of State telephoned me two days before Christmas to tell me that the number of beds at Kent and Canterbury hospital was to be halved and the accident and emergency unit run down. The unit was so busy that last week it even had a bed in one of the bathrooms. I was grateful for his courtesy in telephoning me, but words cannot describe the dismay felt by my constituents and many beyond the boundaries of my constituency. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether the pledge that his right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health gave me in her answer to my Adjournment debate still stands: that no bed will be removed until it is clear that provision exists to cope with the need that exists?

Secondly, can he tell me what steps he will take to ensure that the whole of east Kent, in particular Canterbury, Whitstable and the small villages, which suffer from the worst congestion problems anywhere in the British isles, will have a proper 24-hour accident and emergency service?

Mr. Dobson: As I told the hon. Gentleman, who, to be fair, has campaigned vigorously for the Kent and Canterbury hospital, I have considered the services to be provided in that area, and have received advice from innumerable people and representations from even more. I think that I can at least claim credit for insisting on some substantial changes from the original proposals put forward by the people whom the Tory party appointed to run the health service in Kent. I have ensured special consultant back-up for the A and E service and that consultants are available for other specialist services in the area. I also gave the undertaking that I would keep a close eye on what was happening to bed numbers during the process of change to ensure that it did not go badly. If it looks as though things are going wrong, I am prepared to step in and ensure that the bed reduction does not proceed as quickly, or as far, as presently agreed, let alone according to the huge changes that were originally proposed.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that decisions on health service expenditure and where the money goes are much more important than other statements that we hear from time to time in the House? His ability to spend £1.7 million, set against the prospect of spending more than £20 billion, suggests that this humble, old-fashioned Labour stalwart may be able to do a much better job than those handcuff experts on the Tory Benches and the Liberal Democrats, who believe that we can solve all the problems of the NHS by raising an extra penny on tax. Does he understand that we will shortly reach the defining moment of what is to happen to that money? If he wants more nurses, will he give an assurance that he will pay them—and other NHS workers—a lot more money? He will be measured by that and prospects for a future Labour Government will be much rosier if he manages to resolve that problem, so that we have more, better-equipped and better-paid nurses, and if he ensures that, unlike last time, they are given all the money in one fell swoop.

Mr. Dobson: My good and hon. Friend knows as well as I do that, compared with the £1.7 million that I mentioned, we will be finding more than £3 billion extra for the health service next year—an increase of 5.7 per cent., added to an increase for the health service in the country as a whole of £21 billion in the next three years. What is more, we have announced that as a three-year arrangement so that people in the NHS can do what they have always demanded, which is to plan for a longer period rather than living from hand to mouth from one year to another. I can assure my hon. Friend that I sincerely hope, as I have said on innumerable occasions, that the independent pay review body will bear in mind the evidence that we have given about affordability, the evidence that it has taken from the nurses and our evidence to suggest that it should pay particular attention to the pay of the lowest-paid nurses to make going into nursing more attractive, and will come up with an affordable settlement, which the Government will be able to implement in full.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The Secretary of State will be as alarmed as I am at news of the steady trickle of nurses in hospitals in east Kent who, over the past couple of weeks, in despair at his stewardship of the national health service, have resigned to become agency nurses. They will not be impressed by his attempt to lay the blame on anyone but himself, nor, I suspect, by the sneering tone that he adopted about the East Kent health authority in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), given that only two weeks ago he wrote to my hon. Friend congratulating him on the authority's work on hospital reorganisation.

We have heard the pious hopes of the Secretary of State. Will he tell us what he is doing now to staunch the flow of nurses resigning from the national health service? That flow is increasing and is likely to increase as long as he maintains his complacent attitude.

Mr. Dobson: That question takes the biscuit, given the hon. Gentleman's party's record. There are 140,000

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qualified nurses, trained at public expense, who are no longer in the national health service. The vast bulk of those nurses did not leave over the past fortnight in east Kent; they left over the past 18 years while the Tories were in government, treating them badly and running them down.

National health service staff constantly raise with me the matter of their being subjected to assaults and abuse. When I talked to a senior member of, admittedly in that case, the medical profession about the matter, he told me that they had given up talking to Tory Ministers about the problem, because they were told that nothing could be done about it and that that was the sort of society in which we now lived. The Government do not accept that; we are determined to change things. *[Interruption.]* That was what the man told me and I shall take his word for it.

We have taken a great deal of action and if Conservative Members do not believe me, let me point out that, not long ago, under the previous Government, someone in the east end was assaulted in a hospital—that person's place of work—and although the person who carried out the assault was successfully prosecuted, if the management had had their way and if there had not been a great row about the matter, they would have disciplined and sacked the person who was the subject of the assault for fighting back. That is the standard of concern that the Tories offered nurses when they were in power.

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): I, too, welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend, as will all health workers. They are more than satisfied with his stewardship of the national health service. He is an extremely popular Secretary of State, who is not afraid to go into Marks and Spencer at any time of the day to do his shopping.

One result of the Tomlinson report was the large reduction in the number of beds in London. However, not only was the number of beds reduced, but the role of nurses was reduced by the report. The nature of nurses' work means that they must have good memories and all those nurses whom we want to return to nursing have good memories. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will do everything in his power to convince them that family friendly policies are in place, and that shift patterns will not be subject to diktat, as they were under the previous Government? Nurses were told to like it or lump it; they lumped it and they walked. We have much convincing to do to bring those nurses back, but I believe that with the current team we shall do so.

Regarding nurse education, we need highly qualified and highly skilled nurses to nurse in today's complex health care system. Under the previous Government, we in nurse education were evicted off hospital sites overnight and moved into higher education. Will my right hon. Friend seriously consider bringing some of that education back into hospitals, now that we once again have a national health service, not a business of trusts?

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend for making those points. In relation to nurse education, one of the most harmful things, certainly in London and some of the other big conurbations, is that because nurse training ceased to be the responsibility of the national health service, the hospitals disposed of huge amounts of accommodation designed for nurses. One of the reasons why it is especially difficult to recruit and retain junior nurses in London and other big conurbations is the absence of anywhere for them to live that is reasonably secure and close to the hospital, and that they can afford. That is one of the reasons why I have opened talks with the Housing Corporation to find out whether we can start to make special arrangements for nurses so that we can once again provide nurse accommodation. That problem was one of the products of shifting nurse education out of the health service and almost exclusively into the education system.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The Secretary of State has referred to long memories. Does not he recall that under the previous Labour Government, nurses' pay fell by 3 per cent. and that during the 18 years of Conservative Government, it rose by 70 per cent.? Does not he understand that people are becoming exasperated with him boasting again and again to the House about distributing millions here and billions there, while they open their papers and discover that he is admitting that the health service is in crisis? Does not that reveal that the Government's actions smack more of creative accountancy than caring services?

Mr. Dobson: No.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. That was a very good and brisk reply from the Secretary of State. I was about to remind the House that the statement has now been running for almost an hour. I want to be able to call every hon. Member who wants to speak, but I can achieve that only with the co-operation of the House. I do not want long statements; I want direct questions and good answers like that just given by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): The extra money that my right hon. Friend has made available for improved co-operation between Birmingham health authority and the social services department of Birmingham city council is delivering the goods. It means that people who do not need to go into hospital can safely be kept at home and those who no longer need to be in hospital can safely be returned home. Will he provide more such funds?

Mr. Dobson: Yes.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Does the Secretary of State accept that the recent crisis impacted as seriously in the Portsmouth area as anywhere else? Local management at Queen Alexandra hospital in Cosham and St. Mary's hospital in Portsmouth appealed to family and friends to come in to help to feed and wash patients. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Queen Alexandra hospital has a waiting list of 11,000?

In those circumstances, how can the Government possibly contemplate the closure of the only tri-service military hospital at Royal hospital Haslar in my constituency, where 110,000 patients are treated each year and 27,000 patients are treated in accident and emergency? Will the Secretary of State agree that his Department and the Ministry of Defence will receive an

urgent deputation with representations from Gosport expressing deep concern about the proposed closure and will discuss the way ahead?

Mr. Dobson: At the time of the announcement, I said that I wanted to ensure that any change was not to the disadvantage of the national health service and the people that it serves in Portsmouth, and I shall stick to that.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt that the health service is safe in his hands. I welcome the distribution of the resources that he has outlined today.

In October, the Secretary of State assured me that the consultation procedure in the Wakefield health authority area would be in his charge and that he would call for a report. Will he urgently consider speeding up that consultation, which must be meaningful? I make that plea having received a letter from a constituent who advises me that when his wife took ill on Boxing day, no GP was available and they went to the hospital and had to wait two hours to see a doctor. His wife was admitted five hours later. The consultation process in Wakefield should be speeded up so that we can resolve the problems referred to me by my constituent. Will my right hon. Friend act urgently on those issues?

Mr. Dobson: I shall certainly examine, yet again, the state of consultation on services in the area.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I was relieved to hear the Secretary of State draw back from seeking to blame influenza for the problems. It was ludicrous of him to seek to hide his bulky embarrassment behind a tiny virus. However, does he accept that front-line staff were affected by influenza and that it might be reasonable to vaccinate them through a decent occupational health service in the NHS? Why was that not done, and will he consider doing it in future?

Does the right hon. Gentleman further accept that the staff shortage was made worse by his decision last year to stage the nurses' pay award and that he is now reaping the whirlwind? It takes six years to train a medical student so, as the British Medical Association has today asked, will he reconsider his "short-sighted decision" to stage the vital increase in the number of medical students over seven years, and instead stage it over a shorter, more realistic period?

Mr. Dobson: First, I understand that the hon. Gentleman is a doctor, but there appears to be some theological disputation about the value or otherwise of giving flu jabs to usually healthy adults. Broadly speaking, I favour the idea, but I am told that many studies suggest that it is a waste of time and money and that it does not offer much protection. However, I am prepared to consider it, if I can be convinced that it is worth while.

I have forgotten the hon. Gentleman's second point.

Dr. Harris: Doctors' training.

Mr. Dobson: Oh yes. We have agreed to implement the Campbell report which recommended—let us not underestimate this—a 20 per cent. increase in the number of doctors in training from 5,000 to 6,000. We are going ahead with it, but the increase needs to be staged. One cannot establish a new medical school overnight. They are rather expensive items—I assume the hon. Gentleman knows that if he went to one. Nor can one simply expand medical schools because they need additional staff, and those staff might be taken away from treating patients. The change has to be planned and carried out carefully, and it is.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement and I welcome his acknowledgement of nursing shortages. Will he confirm that there are also serious and growing shortages among midwives? Does he agree that proper pay is important if we are to attract and retain nurses and midwives? Did he see the article by Will Hutton in *The Observer* yesterday, which pointed out that in the past decade, pay for nurses and midwives slumped from 85 per cent. to 76 per cent. of average earnings? Is not it time for a substantial above-inflation increase in pay for nurses and midwives?

Mr. Dobson: As I have said, I certainly want an increase that is fair to nurses and midwives and which is affordable. That is the necessary combination, and I should like that to be the case this year and in future. I also want the changes in grading and career structure which, I understand, the nursing and midwifery professions want, too. The two have to go together.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will the Secretary of State give the House his latest estimate of the increased number of pensioners now entirely dependent on the NHS following his Government's decision to withdraw tax relief for pensioners with private medical insurance?

Mr. Dobson: No, and in this respect I am exactly like the Government who provided the pensioners with the tax relief—they made no estimate before they gave it, and we have made no estimate in taking it away.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): First, I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I, too, congratulate people nationwide, but will he join me in congratulating especially the people at Plymouth Derriford hospital, which last week treated more emergency patients than it has ever done before and is currently admitting the equivalent of more than one ward of patients a day? That certainly deserves acknowledgement.

Secondly, I do not know whether it has been brought to my right hon. Friend's attention, but there was another outbreak of meningitis at the weekend, and two young people are currently in the Plymouth Derriford hospital. The parents of the 1,000 children at the local Coombe Dean school must be very worried. In view of the rather confusing information given by the Opposition, will my right hon. Friend put it on record once again that young and vulnerable people should have no hesitation about going to hospital or to their general practitioner for treatment?

Mr. Dobson: It is certainly the case that, in November, the chief medical officer issued advice to all GPs, saying

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that they should take meningitis very seriously and refer children in particular to hospital if they suspected that they might have it. I would certainly be very happy to congratulate the people at Derriford hospital, and no doubt all over the west country.

My hon. Friend's area will be among those that will benefit from the next stage of the extension of NHS Direct, which will be useful in Plymouth, but may be much more useful in the expansive rural areas of Devon and Cornwall, where getting to treatment or getting treatment to come to the patient is quite difficult. There is a lot of evidence that NHS Direct means that reassurance and advice can be given over a telephone line, to the infinite benefit of patients who are a long way away.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Part of my Christmas recess was taken up in visiting a grievously ill friend in Oldchurch hospital. I saw there some very high-standard nursing, much of it delivered by agency nurses; but I also saw beds in corridors, and I also saw care being given in a dingy, decaying and appalling building. On my way to Oldchurch I passed Harold Wood hospital, whose accident and emergency unit was cancelled due to a decision of the Secretary of State. We were promised that we would get a new accident and emergency unit in Oldchurch hospital. That promise has not been realised; it continues to slip, so my constituents must continue to receive treatment in a substandard hospital. Will the right hon. Gentleman now give a commitment to release money, so that he can make good his promise?

Mr. Dobson: If Oldchurch hospital is substandard, it did not become substandard in the past 18 months; it has been substandard for a long time. That was one of the reasons why Sir Leslie Turnberg and his colleagues who participated in the Turnberg review of health care in London decided that a new hospital was necessary. We have given priority to the development of plans for that hospital, and I hope that, when they emerge, we shall be able to approve them and deliver to that area a first-rate hospital—something which has been lacking for a long time because of the previous Government's indecision.

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport): It seems that the Conservative party is suffering from collective amnesia. Will my right hon. Friend remind the House that it took the death of a child under the previous Conservative Government to initiate an inquiry into failing paediatric services in Greater Manchester? The present Government have put extra money into paediatric care, which has meant a new high-dependency unit and an extra theatre at the Royal Manchester children's hospital, which means that children's lives which otherwise might be at risk are now being saved—and those are not my words, but those of a consultant who works in the hospital. Is not that something to be proud of?

Mr. Dobson: Talking of pride, my hon. Friend should be very proud of the part that she played in the campaign that brought that development about.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I did a clinical surgery in my practice on Boxing day and worked for the GP emergency services on the bank holiday. I can assure the Secretary of State that I have worked over Christmas for more than 25 years, and that there certainly was not an unusual outbreak of unusual disease this year. As he illustrated, in three of the past five years we had a higher incidence of flu than we have now.

However, I agree with the Secretary of State that we have a crisis in the NHS, and that crisis is there because there is absolutely no flexibility in the secondary services. Ninety per cent. bed occupancy may look good to accountants, but it certainly is not useful if one is looking out for the patients. Will the Secretary of State either define what the NHS is for, so that it restricts its activity, or fund it properly?

Mr. Dobson: First, I pay tribute to the hon. and learned Gentleman. I know that only lawyers are called learned in the House, but I believe that doctors are learned as well, so I shall call him learned. I thank him for the service that, as he said, he has provided over Christmas for a very long time.

The intervening water may slightly isolate and protect the Isle of Wight and its population, but there have certainly been huge increases in illness in some localities, including in the south and east of this country.

It would take a long time to describe what the NHS is for, but by and large, it is to provide top-quality care for people who need it, when they need it, paid for by us all.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I phoned my local hospital in Dartford this morning to find out how it was faring. I was told that, apart from one exceptionally bad day last week, it is doing extremely well, and that that one bad day was made considerably easier by the winter pressures money, which has allowed it to draft in home care teams from social services in order that people may go home much sooner. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is illogical for Conservative Members to criticise us for our waiting lists initiative? When we took office, record waiting lists were rising by record levels. That represents record numbers of patients suffering record pain and anguish. My right hon. Friend surely agrees that that is entirely what the NHS is there for.

Mr. Dobson: I must admit that I am rather surprised at the extent to which the Tory party—and, apparently, the Liberal Democrats now—seems to think that exceedingly lengthy waiting lists are perfectly acceptable. We do not, and we are doing something about it. Those working hard in the Dartford hospital may be inspired by the thought that, under this Government, they are getting a new hospital building, and that building work has progressed rapidly. I hope that they will be able to make use of it fairly soon.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The Secretary of State talked of pressure points. Is he aware that, as a consequence of this year's local government settlement, Oxfordshire county council will have to make substantial reductions in its social services budget, which are bound to lead to an increase in bed blocking?

Would not it be better if the independent pay review body told the Government what pay was needed to enable the recruitment and retention of sufficient nurses, and the

Treasury found sufficient funds to meet that requirement, rather than the Treasury telling the independent pay review body what was affordable?

Mr. Dobson: The sinner who is saved is always welcome, I suppose.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Collectively as well as personally.

Mr. Dobson: I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) is speaking collectively. The independent pay review body is supposed to come up with a sufficiently attractive settlement to keep nurses in the profession, attract new people into it and encourage those who have left to return, as well as bearing in mind affordability. We made that clear by changing its terms of reference. In the past, the body has been leaned on by Governments. We have made its terms of reference quite clear; that was accepted by everybody. We think that the situation is more straightforward. Clearly, if a settlement were not affordable, it would not be any good to anybody.

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): Conservative Members have referred to beds and trolleys in corridors. Is the Secretary of State aware that such instances are known universally throughout the NHS as Bottomley wards, as a result of the one fifth cut in acute and general beds under the stewardship of the right hon. Member for South–West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), and the reduction, year on year, in nurses training places?

I welcome my right hon. Friend's recognition of the problems in recruitment and retention of nurses. Will he consider particularly not just the issue of nurses, but other professions allied to medicine and the need to tackle low pay in them? Will he ask the pay review body to look specifically at the use of discretionary awards and their discriminatory effect on gender and race in the NHS?

Mr. Dobson: It is too late for me to ask the review body to do anything other than deliver its final report to myself and the Prime Minister. However, I have taken what I think can be described only as fairly serious and strenuous steps to try to reduce discrimination on the ground of gender and the quite disgraceful discrimination to which many black and Asian people have been subjected in the NHS. I am phenomenally proud of the health service, but its record on that score is quite deplorable. We are determined to change that, and we are changing it.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Secretary of State is on record as saying that only non-urgent operations will be cancelled. Can he explain that to my constituents living in the northern part of the Vale of York, where operations for serious heart conditions, some of which are life-threatening, have been cancelled over the next six weeks? The official reason given by South Cleveland general hospital is that the only consultant heart surgeon there is going off on study leave for up to five or six weeks. Does the Secretary of State agree that such behaviour is totally unacceptable, and will he intervene to ensure that constituents who are expecting operations over that period will be treated?

Mr. Dobson: All I can say on the specific case is that I shall look into it. I have some sympathy with the hon. Lady's point, but she should later address the same question to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald who, as I understand it, was asking earlier that all work on waiting list cases should be brought to an end.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Will the right hon. Gentleman answer the question that he dodged and weaved around during the debate on the Queen's Speech? Given that parliamentary answers and the national health service executive in Leeds have supplied the figures, how can the right hon. Gentleman claim that he has fulfilled his promise on waiting lists with respect to the people served by the Mid-Essex hospital trust, when on 31 March 1997, 104 people had been waiting 12 months or more for hospital treatment, and the November figures show that 1,194 people had been waiting 12 months or more? In every month of his stewardship of the NHS, those figures have gone up.

Mr. Dobson: The figures may have gone up there, but they have not gone up everywhere. They have been coming down over the past six months.

Points of Order

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have given you notice of my intention to raise a point of order, which I believe is a matter of some consequence to the House of Commons.

In *The Times* today, under the headline

"Betty Boothroyd set to quit early as Speaker"—

something that would be regretted by many of us—Ministers are quoted as opining on the matter. I do not know that it is the job of Ministers to opine in public on the matter of the retirement date of the Speaker of the House of Commons. That is a matter, rather, for the House of Commons.

Be that as it may, the article also states:

"Loyalist Labour MPs feel that she can be too lenient in giving Commons time to government critics, such as Tony Benn and George Galloway over Iraq."

I was telephoned yesterday by an experienced member of the Lobby, asking for my comment on the idea that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) and for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) and I had been given favourable treatment by you, Madam Speaker, in putting a minority case on Iraq—which, incidentally, may be far from a minority case in the country as a whole. I refuted the idea that we had been treated favourably. I said that we had been treated fairly, and that is all that Members of Parliament can ask of a Speaker.

The tenor of the conversation suggested nothing about loyalist Labour Members of Parliaments having said any such thing. It was quite clear that the Government press office had said it. That is rather a different matter. The issue that I put before the House is whether it is acceptable that spin doctors of any Government should spin against the judgment of the Speaker of the House of Commons. A Speaker's judgment can be criticised only by substantive motion of the House, can it not? It is important that only a substantive motion of the House could criticise the judgment of the Speaker in such a matter. Frankly, it has become a question of the House of Commons versus Downing street and the sooner that that is faced up to, the better.

Two Parliaments ago, I had an Adjournment debate on the role of the Prime Minister's press secretary, who at that time was Bernard Ingham. It may be necessary for one of us to raise another Adjournment debate on that subject because this matter transcends party politics.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. May I contribute?

Madam Speaker: Why not?

Mr. Benn: I urge you, Madam Speaker, to consider the point that my hon. Friend has raised because, quite apart from any party advantage that may be gained, that practice has grown up over a long period with all Governments, going right back to the Government of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) and perhaps that of Harold Wilson. Information is conveyed to the public through the press and, increasingly, Members of Parliament have to listen to the "Today" programme or watch the David Frost interview to find out what a Minister will say in the House later.

Given your historic duty not only to exercise the fairness from which I have benefited, but to protect the House, I urge you, Madam Speaker, to warn Ministers that it is an offence to authorise their press officers to make statements that should be made to the House. Will you also warn them that those press officers who criticise the Chair are in breach of a long-term practice? As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) says, that can be dealt with only by a substantive motion in the House, which I once tabled much to my cost later, when I found it hard to catch the Speaker's eye.

Madam Speaker: I think that what is being expressed is not a point of order, but a point of view. I am sure that it will be noted in the appropriate places. There is a rainbow of views to be expressed in this House and, for as long as I am Speaker, those views will be heard.

May I refer to the earlier point made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell)? I wish those who are interested to know that I have no intention to retire. When I come to that decision, this House will be the first to know.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Can you advise the House whether the Government will make a statement on the allegations of breaches of company law by the former Paymaster General and on what the Government intend to do about those?

Madam Speaker: I have not been informed that a statement will be made on that issue. I am told during the course of the early morning when the Government intend to make a statement. I may hear something tomorrow morning, but so far I know nothing about it.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you received any intimations from the Prime Minister of his intention to make a statement about his extraordinary decision to appoint the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), as personal envoy representing him with Ministers from a foreign Government? Clearly, that raises constitutional concerns, particularly about accountability to the House. If you have received no such indication, may we have a debate on the matter at some point?

Madam Speaker: I am not in control of the business of the House and I have received no such intimation from the Prime Minister. However, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Prime Minister answers questions for half an hour on Wednesdays and Back Benchers have an opportunity to question him then. If not, the Leader of the Opposition has ample opportunity to do so on that issue.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. As this is our first sitting after the Christmas recess, I wish to raise the matter of the resignation of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) from the Department of Trade and Industry. He resigned because he thought that he had

committed serious financial improprieties in relation to his building society, but a number of other issues arise. Have you been informed that a Minister will make a statement on whether the proper ministerial declarations were made? I know that this matter should be investigated by the Permanent Secretary of the Department concerned, and ultimately by the Cabinet Secretary, but it is of interest to the House and the public to know whether such an investigation will be carried out and, if so, whether the results will be publicised.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Does it relate?

Mr. Skinner: Yes, it does.

On the question of registration, before making any statement, or guiding anyone else to make one, would you, Madam Speaker, take note of the fact that the House decided, very solemnly, to ensure that every Member of Parliament who had outside interests entered those interests and made sure that the money that they obtained thereby—in bands of £5,000 and upwards—was in the register? Anyone looking at the register will find that at least 30 Tories, some of them Front Benchers, have refused to abide by the decision of the House. It is high time they were made to do so.

Madam Speaker: If any hon. Member wants to press this further there are two routes. One concerns the ministerial code of conduct—the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), who raised the point of order, might want to raise that with the Prime Minister—and there is the Commissioner for Standards, if others are concerned about items not being registered.

Orders of the Day

Rating (Valuation) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

5.46 pm

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I can assure you, Madam Speaker, that none of this has reached "Today" or anywhere else, but, none the less, hon. Members are leaving the Chamber. The Rating (Valuation) Bill is brief and aims to place the law on rating valuations of non-domestic property on a fair and equitable footing. It will ensure parity of treatment between ratepayers and make explicit the assumptions that underlie the valuations made for the 1990 and 1995 rating lists. It will also apply to future revaluations.

It might help hon. Members if I start by saying something about non-domestic rates. They are a tax on non-domestic property. Rates bills are calculated by multiplying the rateable value of a property by a poundage set annually by central Government. It is therefore essential that rateable values are assessed fairly. To ensure that rates bills are based on up-to-date values, a full revaluation exercise is carried out every five years. Revaluations are carried out on the basis of a common valuation date—for example, the revaluation in 1995 was based on rental values on 1 April 1993. They are also made on the basis of certain assumptions, one of which derives from long-standing case law dating from before the Local Government Finance Act 1988.

That case law required all valuations to be based on an assumed state of reasonable repair, and valuation officers have valued property on that basis since the introduction of national non-domestic rates following the 1988 Act. They have assumed that—other than in extreme cases, and whatever its actual condition at the valuation date—the property is, and remains, in a state of reasonable repair.

That is a fair and reasonable assumption to make. It has underpinned the rating valuations carried out by the Valuation Office for the 1990 and 1995 rating lists and informed the way in which thousands of appeals against those valuations have been decided. On 11 March 1998, however, in the case of Benjamin *v.* Anston Properties, the Lands Tribunal held that the valuer could not assume a state of reasonable repair, but that the valuation should instead reflect the actual condition of the property at the valuation date.

If left undisturbed, the tribunal's decision would lead to considerable unfairness in the way in which different businesses are assessed for rates. It would also cause severe practical difficulties with the administration of the system and risk significant loss of rate income.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Can the Minister give us some idea of the number of appeals that have been lodged as a result of the decision made on 11 March, in an attempt to gain benefit from that decision?

Ms Armstrong: When an appeal is lodged, it is impossible to know whether the appellant is basing that

[Ms Armstrong]

appeal on a particular decision. Only when the appeal is heard is it possible to be confident about the nature of the appeal. I shall return to that point when I explain how the Government intend to implement the Bill.

There is an exception for repairs that would be uneconomic. In such cases, a valuation would be made on the basis that such repairs would not be made. In making his valuation, the valuation officer will, as he always has, take into account the age, location and type of property being valued in deciding what is a state of reasonable repair.

If the Bill were not enacted, the rating system would be unfair as between individual ratepayers, and much more difficult to administer. Let me deal first with the question of fairness. As I have said, unless there is a material change of circumstances, the value of non-domestic property on which the annual rate liability is based is assessed only once every five years. Fairness dictates that, at that time, two identical properties in the same location should be given the same rateable value, and hence should have the same rates liability over the following five years. However, two buildings, identical in every other respect, may, on the day on which they are assessed for rates, be in different states of repair. Indeed, it is almost certain that they will be. Most commercial property is let on the basis that the occupier will maintain the property in a reasonable condition.

As hon. Members know from their own domestic properties, all buildings need repairing simply to maintain their condition; but, as they will also know, the timing of repairs and the speed with which the works are done will depend on the individual decisions of the person occupying the property. It is likely, therefore—indeed, almost certain—that two identical properties in good repair on the day on which they were let to different tenants will be in more or less different states of repair on any particular day of the year, including the common date every five years on which the properties have their rateable values assessed for rating purposes.

That being so, if rateable values were based on the actual repair condition of a property on a single, arbitrarily chosen date, the two properties would not have identical rates bills. They would have different rates bills over that five-year period unless the rateable value was adjusted, perhaps daily, to reflect changes in the repair condition of the property. That brings me to the severe practical difficulties caused by the tribunal's decision.

First, the decision means that any ratepayer, the rateable value of whose property was based on the assumption of a condition of reasonable repair for either the 1990 or the 1995 revaluation—or, indeed, both—and who believed that his property was not in that condition, could make a proposal to change the valuations concerned. Any ratepayer can do that within a year of a decision in an appeal which he believes affects the value of his own property.

The tribunal's decision sets out an interpretation of the law that can be used as the basis for changing the rateable values of other properties. Such proposals would present enormous difficulties: they would be almost impossible to determine accurately, because of the likely absence of reliable evidence about the state of repair of the property on the common valuation date.

Secondly, the Valuation Office would face great difficulties with the forthcoming 2000 revaluation, work on which has already begun. For the 2000 revaluation, the valuation date is I April 1998. Much of the work constitutes a desk exercise conducted on the basis of forms of return, the valuation officer's knowledge and the evidence that he collects about local property market conditions. The assumption of a common standard of repair enables him to carry out his work in that way.

Physical inspections of properties are the exception and not the rule; but if the valuation officer must assess the actual condition of a property, it will involve the agency—potentially, at least—in inspecting every single one of 1.7 million hereditaments on the rating list in order to make that assessment, which simply cannot be done.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister clarify another point? As I have found in reading up on it, the subject is extremely complicated, involving many formidable terms that are often impenetrable because of the lack of plain English. An issue of case law has, however, been drawn to my attention. The 1937 Robinson Brothers *v.* Houghton and Chester-le-Street assessment committee judgment placed a duty on valuation officers to assess the rateable value of commercial premises, taking into account matters that would intrinsically affect it, both upwards and downwards. I understand that that duty still applies. Is the Minister saying that the Bill will effectively extinguish the precedent that was set back in 1937?

Ms Armstrong: Case law from 1937 has been built on and incorporated in successive legislation. The Bill will return the law to what it was assumed to be following the passage of the 1988 Act, and will therefore not disturb case law that was incorporated into the manner of dealing with things in those early days. It is because we now have a new case law that places a different interpretation on legislation that people thought was settled that we felt the need to present the Bill.

I was talking about the practical difficulties of implementing the law, as we would understand it, following a tribunal decision. The position would be very difficult, because every property would have to be inspected on a particular day, which would be impossible. Indeed, the position could be even worse: to ensure fairness to ratepayers, theoretically it would be necessary for the valuation officer to make regular and frequent inspections of every single property. Liability for non-domestic rates arises day by day on the value of a property for that day; when valuations change, the tax liability changes with them. As I have said, if we cannot assume a common state of repair for the five-year-period, in fairness the repair condition of the property would need to be continually reassessed. We could reasonably expect the ratepayer to inform the valuation officer when he believed that the value of his property had fallen following changes in the state of repair of that property; he might not be so forthcoming in reporting repairs that might increase its rateable value. It would, of course, be impracticable to resource the valuation officer, or local authorities, to enable them to carry out frequent and regular inspections of 1.7 million properties; but, in extreme circumstances, that would be required if rating lists were to reflect every property's actual condition throughout the five years of a list.

Therefore, the Bill is necessary to ensure fairness between ratepayers and to avoid administrative chaos. Unless we are also to upset the valuations carried out for both the 1990 and 1995 rating lists, it must apply retrospectively as well as to future revaluations.

However, we do not wish to deprive the ratepayer company in the Lands Tribunal case of the benefits of its successful appeal. That would not be right. Therefore, we have provided that the Bill's retrospective provisions will not apply to that case, or to any other where a proposal for an alteration of the rateable value shown in the rating list was made and not withdrawn or finally disposed of before 12 March, the day after the Lands Tribunal made its decision.

That perhaps goes somewhat wider than hon. Members might expect. It would certainly be fair to exclude from the Bill's retrospective provisions only those ratepayers who had appealed on the same basis as that in the Anston Properties case, and had not already had their appeal settled. However, it is simply not possible to distinguish fairly between appeals made on that basis and those made on other grounds. Therefore, we have decided that the retrospection should not apply to a property where the ratepayer made a proposal to alter the value on or before the date on which the Lands Tribunal made its decision.

The Bill amends the Local Government Finance Act 1988 to ensure that property in England or Wales that is subject to non-domestic rating is valued consistently, on the assumption that it is in a state of reasonable repair. That assumption will apply whatever the actual condition of the property, except in relation to repairs that it would be uneconomic for the landlord to carry out.

The Bill relates only to the specific assumption as to a property's state of repair and does not interfere with any other legislation in relation to valuation of non-domestic properties; that point may assist the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) following his intervention. It is a simple measure that ensures that rating valuations are made fairly and consistently for all ratepayers. I commend it to the House.

6.2 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): The Minister said that the Bill is a simple measure. That will possibly be the understatement of the debate. I am sure that she would agree that it may be simple in some ways because of its shortness, but it is a highly technical and complicated measure, which has, I suspect, exercised the minds of civil service lawyers and professionals in the valuation sector over several months.

There are in the Bill several issues that I trust that the Minister can address; perhaps the junior Minister will do so when winding up. In particular, it is clear that several professional bodies have made representations to her Department disputing the Government's interpretation of the existing body of case law. The explanatory notes to the Bill present that as an anomaly in an otherwise clear field. Several professionals have approached the Opposition to say that they do not concur with that interpretation.

For example, the official submission from the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation suggests that the ratepayer's success in the Benjamin *v.* Anston Properties Ltd. case was

"widely anticipated throughout the profession".

Meanwhile, the Rating Surveyors Association states plainly that it does

"not agree with the suggestion . . . that the Bill is 'restoring' the law to a previous position".

Clearly, there is a certain amount of confusion and doubt within the profession.

The argument centres around the status of the rebus sic stantibus rule—the idea that the rating value of a property should reflect its actual condition. That seems to be a clear enough guiding principle, but, needless to say, it is not as simple as that. The Bill seeks to ensure that, in future, rating valuations are arrived at on the basis that properties are in a "reasonable" condition. The Government claim that that reflects the method that was used for previous valuations, but, as I have said, there seems to be some dissent on that issue. We shall be looking hopefully for clarification from the Government on that point.

Naturally, the difference between a valuation on the basis of rebus sic stantibus and one that assumes a reasonable state of repair will, in some cases, lead to big variations in business rates. That has a particularly large impact on small businesses, especially in generally rundown areas. It is important that the Bill does not do lasting damage to small and medium enterprises, and imperative that it does not hinder attempts at economic regeneration in some of our most deprived areas.

It will not, I am sure, have entirely escaped the House's attention that the effect of assuming a "reasonable" state of repair, rather than an actual one, will almost certainly be to enhance the tax base available for the purpose of non-domestic rating. The question remains as to whether it provides a basis for fair business taxation. The drafting of the Bill leaves that open to doubt, but I should be more than grateful if the Minister wanted to intervene to clarify that point.

Ms Armstrong: As the hon. Gentleman says, there is some dispute among the professions. They are suggesting that the Bill goes further than we are suggesting; that is the area to which the hon. Gentleman alludes. I do not agree with that. Obviously, I am not qualified to say what valuers believed or did not believe the 1988 Act to mean, but the leading authority on rating, the book "Ryde on Rating and the Council Tax" clearly says that properties should be valued on a common repair assumption.

It may help the hon. Gentleman if I quote from the current edition, which says:

"The rule that the hereditament must be valued in its existing physical state does not apply to defects which are due to ordinary lack of repair. The cases in which this exception to the rebus sic stantibus rule has been established and applied arose largely in the context of the definition of 'gross value' under previous legislation, in which the burden of repair was placed by statute upon the hypothetical landlord. Nevertheless, it is submitted that the principles established are equally applicable when, as now, the obligation to repair falls upon the tenant."

It was on that basis that we introduced the legislation. The case this time was that, because the basis had changed from the landlord to the tenant, that meant that the whole basis of assumptions had changed. We are saying that that was not the intention. Indeed, the major book and guide on the issue affirms that.

Mr. Burns: I thank the Minister for what was clearly a helpful intervention. I do not want to be churlish or to start quibbling, and I appreciate the time that she took to

[Mr. Burns]

seek to clear up the matter. Obviously, we shall have an opportunity at a later stage to come back to the matter if the situation and issue merit it, but there is a further concern among professionals, which it is important to put on the record—the question of the word "reasonable".

As the IRRV points out in its submission to the Department, although there are guidelines contained in the explanatory notes, those have no force in law. The Bill itself is silent on that issue. The concern is that the Bill will have the opposite effect to that intended. Clearly, it has been introduced to clear up what the Government see as a potential problem in the shape of the Benjamin *v.* Anston case. The Government are worried that that will lead to further litigation along those lines, and see the Bill, not unreasonably, as a way of preventing that. However, in addition to the professions' concerns about the rebus sic stantibus rule, both the IRRV and the RSA have expressed serious concern that the Bill's drafting will lead to more, not less, litigation, because of the uncertainties surrounding the introduction of the assumption of a reasonable state of repair, especially in relation to the use of the term "reasonable".

Ministers may want to return to that matter at a later stage, but I hope that they will appreciate the professional bodies' concerns.

Ms Armstrong: Clearly, we have to discuss the issue. It is the Government's intention to make it clearer, especially for the ratepayer, precisely on what basis rates are to be paid, and to produce a workable system. I appreciate the fact that hon. Members will want to discuss what we mean by "reasonable", and I would consider that a valid subject for discussion in Committee.

Mr. Burns: To continue our bipartisan approach, I thank the Minister for making that point. She is absolutely right, and we will certainly want to raise the issue in Committee and hear more about the Government's view and the way in which they intend to ensure that the legislation does not create problems that they have not so far anticipated.

Conservative Members want the Bill to provide a fair and clear basis for the levying of business rates, and I am sure that the Government would agree with us. We have some doubts whether the Bill as drafted will achieve that aim. We do not oppose the Bill and we understand why the Government felt that they had to act, but, as a responsible Opposition, we want to work with them to iron out any possible flaws that could render the operation of the legislation unfair or unworkable and could achieve the exact opposite of what was intended.

I shall certainly not ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to force a Division on a Bill that is needed in the light of certain events.

6.12 pm

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I declare a non-pecuniary interest as a member of the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation of more than 20 years' standing, and an honorary member of the Society of Clerks of Valuation Tribunals.

The legislation is necessary and sets down in law what was always assumed to be the situation. Under previous legislation, it was always assumed that the repair liability existed when a valuation took place. Valuation related directly to rateable value was made on the assumption that the tenant would keep the property in a good state of repair.

The Bill places responsibility for repair on the landlord before occupation of a property—that is sensible and straightforward, but it introduces a new concept to statute by making the assumption that, when it is uneconomic to return a dilapidated property to a good state of repair, the valuation will be based on the unrepaired property, rebus sic stantibus.

The origins of rating go back to the poor relief laws of 1601, and a whole series of case law has developed valuation for rating. In this century, we have for the first time arrived at a system whereby valuations are made on the assumption that the property is not in a good state of repair. Many of the initial cases involved something exceptional about the property—often structural repairs, subsidence or some other major defect affecting rental values—that meant that the cost of repair would be disproportionate to the additional rental value that it would create.

The Bill's wording may lead such cases to involve not only properties with major structural defects, but ones that have simply not been kept in good repair. The property in the Benjamin *v.* Anston Properties Ltd. case, which was in Brighton, became unoccupied in the late 1980s, largely for economic reasons, and fell into disrepair. It is my understanding that there were no major structural problems.

There are problems associated with properties in certain age groups or areas when they have fallen into disrepair. There was an interesting article by Tom Dixon in the IRRV journal, referring to the problems of the empty property rate and the fact that there was a disincentive to repair such properties. I am sure that the provisions will be used extensively to avoid paying rates.

There is a problem in that many properties have leases of 14 or 21 years, with upward-only rent reviews. When properties become less desirable or popular, tenants cannot bring about a rent reduction. That was never a problem when there was rapid inflation but, over the past 10 years, certain classes of properties have had minimal changes in cash rental values and, with upward-only rent reviews, tenants are trapped into paying more than the market rent.

That is an incentive for the tenants not to fulfil their obligation to keep the property in a good state of repair, and they may pass on the lease to sub-lessees to avoid their responsibilities. There is a danger that properties that could be put into a good state of repair and let at a realistic rent will be left in disrepair because of the effect of upward-only rent reviews and the fact that rates are based on rental values that are themselves tied to such reviews. The rates may be excessive, because there is no downward review for most commercial rents.

Should Government managers give me the opportunity, I look forward to exploring more extensively in Committee some of the points that have been made by professionals.

6.19 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) has done an excellent job in the cause of seeking a place on the Committee. Other hon. Members have ably demonstrated how confusing and complicated the matter is; I say not that they have confused us, but that the subject matter is confusing.

We could be forgiven for thinking that the Bill is non-controversial and that it will simply ensure that the law is as everyone had understood it to be and as Parliament had intended it to be. The Bill should therefore be only a technical matter that should not long be delayed in its passage. However, I should say that, in trying to get to grips with the issues raised in the Bill, and the case law that has already been mentioned in the debate, I found the matter to be quite challenging. Some formidable terminology is used, and plain English is absent.

My understanding is that the impetus for the Bill's passage started with the March 1998 Lands Tribunal decision in the case known as Benjamin *v.* Anston Properties Ltd., which seems to have boiled down to an argument of administrative convenience versus some long-established principles underpinning the way in which the rateable value of business premises has been determined.

Under current law, all non-domestic properties must be assessed individually. However, as the Minister told us earlier, that is largely a desk-top exercise and, in practice, similar properties are considered to obtain an average level of rental value for those properties. I have been told by those in the profession that the tone of the rating list is determined in that manner—by reference to types of properties.

Properties of the same type—shops, for example—in a specific location will therefore have a similar value. Subsequently—at least until now—the rating list has been susceptible to further refinement through the appeal process and by reference to differences between properties materially affecting their value. The principle that a property should be valued as it is in fact was clearly stated in case law as long ago as 1937, in Robinson Brothers *v.* Houghton and Chester le Street assessment committee. Moreover, the precedent established in that case had been established in previous law.

In Robinson Brothers, it was made clear that, in weighing up the evidence bearing upon value, the valuer has a duty to take into consideration every intrinsic quality and intrinsic circumstance that tends to push the rental value either up or down. The proposition is known as rebus sic stantibus and goes to the heart of the valuation system. I think that the Bill, at the very least, weakens that basic proposition of the valuation system. Moreover, as drafted the Bill would make it possible for the proposition to be abandoned entirely.

It has been argued by the Minister, and in consultations between the various professional institutes and officials in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, that the rebus rule does not apply to repairs, and that is what the Anston case was all about. However, studies of the textbooks have shown that the law on the matter is somewhat vague because, until now, the proposition that rebus does not apply to repairs has been made in the context of valuations made on gross values. That is not the situation that we are debating today.

I have been informed by the various professional interests in the matter that the decision in the Anston case came as no surprise to them. In their view, the decision simply confirmed what was already generally understood to be established practice and precedent. The valuation officer in the Anston case argued that all economically feasible repairs had been performed prior to the hypothetical letting.

I should say that the issue in the Anston case was that the previous tenants had left the premises in a rather bad state of repair, and that the rateable value in the 1990 list was £272,000. However, it was agreed in the tribunal hearing that, on the material day, repairs would have cost at least £300,000.

The Lands Tribunal president, Judge Marder, described the proposition made by counsel for the Valuation Office—that a semi-derelict property should be valued on the basis that it might reasonably be expected to be let at full value—as extending the meaning of

"'reasonably' to an unreasonable degree".

We shall undoubtedly return later to that issue, as the Bill will provide new opportunities to explore what is meant by "reasonable". We should be concerned about the definition, which certainly the profession believes could lead to more rather than fewer cases.

As the Local Government Finance Act 1988 placed the obligation of repair on the hypothetical tenant, surely it is unreasonable to assume that a tenant would take a property in substantial disrepair and expend large sums on it simply to increase his rent liability. Counsel for the Valuation Office made it clear that the effects of its success in the appeal would have been to make it easier to administer the valuation process. In other words, it was an argument as much about ease of administration as about equity and fairness in how the system was being applied to individual businesses.

The Valuation Office argued that the Anston decision would open the floodgates on appeals. Where are those appeals? I asked the Minister earlier whether statistics on such appeals were available, but was told that statistics are not gathered in that manner. My understanding is that a floodtide of appeals has not been unleashed because of the Anston decision.

The profession believes that the measures proposed in the Bill are an overreaction to an imagined problem. That was the view also of the judge in the case. Moreover, the consequences of passing the Bill unamended would be not only to reduce the legitimate grounds on which valuation appeals are heard, but to open up a can of worms of the definition of "repairs", "reasonable" and "uneconomic".

I should give an example of how the Bill would work in practice. The Government have said many times that they support traditional high streets and want to help the regeneration of our inner cities. However, if the Bill's provisions were to be applied strictly, retailers trading on the edge of profitability in less attractive or tired and run down locations could be driven out of business.

Ms Armstrong: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I should not like hon. Members to go away with the impression that, currently or historically, properties have been assessed as he is implying. The Bill's main thrust is simply to enshrine what valuation officers have assumed in valuing properties. Valuers outside the Valuation Office may not see the matter in that light, but

[Ms Armstrong]

I assure the hon. Gentleman that valuation officers have made those assumptions in their work. That is why the example that he is dealing with is painting an incorrect picture.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying that point. It is probably an issue to which we shall wish to return, perhaps after tabling amendments to the Bill. The profession certainly feels that the principle and precedent are sufficiently unclear. The Lands Tribunal decision in the Anston case deals in some detail with how the judge in the case believed the system worked. Perhaps the Minister will say in his reply whether the Government and officials believe that the judge was misdirecting himself in that respect and was describing a system that did not match the actual system. I should certainly be interested to know whether it was felt that the judgment was defective in that sense. I have seen nothing in the Bill's explanatory notes or heard anything in the debate to show that there is such a belief.

If my contention holds—although I understand that the Minister does not accept it—it would have a significant impact on retail situations in more marginal retail locations. We therefore remain concerned about the Bill and its consequences. The logical conclusion of my argument is that the system, if it were made more uniform and easier to administer for the Valuation Office, could have the effect of hastening the run down of inner-city shopping parades.

Another consequence of the Bill as it is drafted is that the system would not be able to recognise the effect of natural disasters that result in temporary disrepair. Therefore, damage done by fire, flood, storm or some other natural disaster would not result in a lower rateable value. If the Bill had been law at the time of the floods in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), businesses in Ross-on-Wye would have received no relief through the rating system. I hope that the Minister will confirm when he winds up that the Government will give further consideration to that issue to give some comfort to those who fear the loss of such relief.

I understand that, since the announcement in a written answer in July 1998 that the Government intended to legislate, little consultation with the valuation profession or with business has been undertaken. Indeed, the first time that the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation learned of the Government's intentions was when the Bill was published in November. On what is supposed to be a non-controversial, technical matter, it is surprising that the Government did not provide an opportunity for dialogue to avoid the concerns that are now being brought to the attention of hon. Members and aired in the House tonight.

The Bill contains flaws and it undermines important principles that underpin our rating system. As a consequence, it is not friendly to business. It will make the system less fair and less responsive. It allows for a significant dumbing down of the valuation system at the expense of business. The Bill will make the system simpler for valuation offices to administer by imposing an unreal uniformity on a system that is meant to reflect the operation of market forces. It may reduce the level of leakage resulting from valuation appeals and increase the level of certainty about business rate income. One can understand that the Treasury might wish to have more certainty when forecasting the income from business rates, but that should not necessarily be the objective of a rating system that is meant to apply fairly to all businesses.

The Bill breaches the principle that the law is intended to deal with future acts and should not attempt retrospectively to change matters that have been concluded in good faith on the basis of existing law. We believe that the Bill should not receive a Second Reading. We accept that it probably will, and therefore, in Committee, we will probe the Government further and improve the legislation to achieve the best outcome for all concerned.

6.32 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Given the fact that hon. Members were outnumbered by the number of civil servants in the corner at the beginning of the debate, it is obvious that the Bill is anything but simple. It secures that the assumptions on which the 1990 and 1995 rating lists were compiled will continue to apply, and provides for subsequent rating lists to be compiled on the same basis. That seems reasonable enough and the Bill appears to be a minor, technical Bill, affecting the valuation of non-domestic properties for rating purposes only. It was published on 27 November, but was not in the Queen's Speech. It is only two pages long, it is non-contentious and it is unlikely to be opposed by the official Opposition. Indeed, one would not expect the official Opposition to oppose a Bill that merely corrects their legislation when in government.

The need for the Bill arose when a Lands Tribunal ruling, referred to earlier as the Benjamin *v.* Anston Properties case, apparently went against what was thought to be the rule that a property should be valued as though it were in reasonable repair. That is rightly to deter owners from constructive vandalism or neglect, which is a common phenomenon when an owner wants to redevelop a site and speed up the departure of existing tenants. Under that rule, a reduction in rateable value of a property and in rates payable on it is prevented, and the owner's neglect results in no reduced rate bill.

The Bill will be backdated to 1990, but not if a property's valuation list entry has been amended between then and 11 March 1998. With a full revaluation for the uniform business rate in progress and due to take effect in 2000, the impact on rates payable thereafter will be considerable. The biggest effect will be on blighted urban areas where benign neglect is most common.

The problem with the UBR is that rating properties on an annual rental value taxes enterprise. It hits small local firms much harder than large ones, because small businesses have more of their assets tied up in stock, turnover and wages, whereas big firms can afford to trade at a loss for long periods. The rating system is just one part of a casino economic system that benefits investors and speculators at the expense of enterprise and labour. While traders on the high street pay rates, landowners pay nothing. The community's wealth comes from the efforts of enterprising businesses, not from the risk-free ownership of land. By leaving a site empty, the owner cuts the footfall in all nearby businesses.

Who pays? Not the landowner. The chances are that he or she lives hundreds of miles away. Meanwhile, local businesses carry on paying high rates based on pre-slump values, leading to more business failures, more dereliction, and less footfall. It happens in even the most prosperous towns in Britain. Everybody except the landowners and banks suffers. The Government lose revenue, communities lose jobs, the least mobile residents lose accessible town centre shops, councils find it difficult to revive towns and have to cope with dereliction. The most enterprising people who make our towns live—the local businesses and traders—pay a rate that is an unfair burden that gets more unfair every year.

None of us likes waste, so why not tax it? We want more local jobs, enterprise and trade, so why tax the people who provide them? Why encourage land speculation? Why penalise those who improve their property? We are pledged to shift the burden of tax away from jobs and enterprise on to pollution and resource consumption. One aspect of that is site value rating as an alternative to the uniform business rate. Or in other words—tax what we disapprove of, not what we approve.

The Bill has two problems. The first is the escape clause whereby any repairs that a reasonable landlord would consider uneconomic are excluded from the definition of reasonable repair. In other words, if the neglect is great enough, the owner can get away with it. If the staircase or roof were removed, making the property unusable, no rates would be payable. Merely getting behind with the decorations or clearing the gutters would mean that the owner had to pay the same rates as a model owner. That cannot be fair.

Secondly, why should the tenant pay for the owner's faults? If an owner fails to maintain a property, assuming that it is not let on a repairing lease, the tenant would pay the higher bills that would result from the new basis for valuation. Perversely, the Bill could result in faster dereliction of properties and areas as businesses pay more rates on the good repair assumption while the owners do not have to do the repairs that were the basis of the valuations. It is almost a charter for bad landlords. I shall be interested in the Minister's response—and I have noticed that he has been handed various pieces of paper, which will probably make his life more difficult.

Ms Armstrong *rose—*

Mr. Sanders: I shall give way briefly because I have almost concluded my remarks.

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman's points are not legitimate in relation to the Bill. His objection that the tenant and not the landlord will have responsibility would have been made during the passage of the Local Government Finance Act 1988. We do not seek to change the basis of that Bill, so we cannot deal with that issue in this Bill.

Mr. Sanders: We shall test that point in Committee, as the Minister's remarks do not fit with my reading of the Bill. Clearly, the Bill says that if the owner fails to maintain a property, the tenant pays the higher bill under the new valuation. There is also an escape clause, which will cause a problem with the definition of "reasonable". We have had no true, concise definition that will make matters fair for those who must pay the uniform business rate.

6.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Alan Meale): As my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing said earlier, the Rating (Valuation) Bill is a short Bill to ensure that, in valuing a property for rating purposes, the property is assumed to be in a state of reasonable repair. That assumption will apply whatever the actual condition of the property, except in relation to repairs that would be uneconomic. The Bill puts the law on rating valuations on a fair and equitable footing while also making clear the assumptions that underlie the valuations made for both the 1990 and 1995 rating lists, and for future valuations.

Opposition Members have asked about the implications for ratepayers. In practice, most ratepayers will see no change as a result of the Bill. Valuations of non-domestic property carried out by the Valuation Office agency are already based on the assumption that a property is in a state of reasonable repair, unless the disrepair is such that it would be uneconomic to remedy it. In such cases, the repair is assumed not to have been made, and the rateable value is adjusted downwards appropriately. As my hon. Friend also said, the Bill simply codifies those principles, ensuring that they will be applied consistently in future.

The position of derelict property will remain the same as it was previously. If it is incapable of being let in that state, it will attract no value. In other circumstances, the valuer will assume a state of reasonable repair when valuing a property, taking account of its age and location. If the property is run down because it is near the end of its useful life, or if it is in a rundown area, those facts will be reflected in the assumption about its reasonable state of repair.

Mr. Sanders: Surely that is the whole failing of the uniform business rate system. Why have not the Government introduced a Bill that would address that point?

Mr. Meale: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, he may find out.

If a property is in need of repair to bring it up to a reasonable state, the cost of repairs will be taken into account. If the costs are such that a landlord cannot hope to recover them from the rent that he could reasonably expect to receive for a property given its age and location, he will be assumed not to make the repairs. The rateable value of the property in that case will be lower, reflecting its unrepaired state.

Retrospection has also been raised. I am obliged to advise the House that property has already been assessed on the basis of an assumed state of repair in both the 1990 and 1995 revaluations. If the Bill did not apply retrospectively, all previous rateable values would be brought into question. In such circumstances, it would be a physical impossibility for valuation officers to reassess in 1999 the repair condition of 1.7 million properties on each day since 1990.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing has pointed out that the Bill contains safeguards for the ratepayer in the case of Benjamin *v.* Anston Properties Ltd, and for others who lodged proposals to change their rateable values before the date on which the tribunal decision was made. In recognition of the fact that

[Mr. Meale]

such ratepayers might have sought to argue on the same basis as the ratepayers in the Anston Properties case, the Bill ensures that retrospection will not apply to any ratepayer whose appeal had not been finally dealt with by that date. Those ratepayers, and the ratepayer in the Anston case, will effectively enjoy the fruits of their litigation in respect of the 1990 and 1995 lists.

I am not aware of any appeal having been levied since the date of our announcement in July. On whether retrospection should apply only to appeals lodged before the date of that ministerial announcement, I must say that that would be illogical. The Bill protects anyone who made a proposal before he or she knew the judgment in the Anston case and who had not settled his or her appeal by that date. It may be argued that such ratepayers might, quite independently, have interpreted the law in the same way as the Anston ratepayer, and, ultimately, the courts. As such, they should not be denied the fruits of their litigation.

Any ratepayers who had not made a proposal by the date of the Anston decision had presumably not done so because they were happy with their rateable value and the way in which it had been calculated. To allow such ratepayers to avoid the effects of retrospection if they managed to enter a proposal between the dates of the Anston decision and the Government's announcement of legislation would simply benefit those who were quickest off the mark, and that would be unsatisfactory and unfair.

Questions have been raised as to whether the Bill would conflict with certain European conventions. We are satisfied that it does not. We made an early announcement on 29 July of our intention to legislate. We have ensured that the Bill does not deprive the appellant property owner of the fruits of his litigation, and that the Bill is not unfair to other property owners who had already commenced proceedings. The retrospective effect of the Bill does not affect the ratepayer in the appeal, or any other ratepayer who, on or before the date of the decision on the appeal, had made a proposal for alteration of the rating list which was not disposed of before that date.

Hon. Members must realise the possible financial consequences if the Bill is not enacted, asking, for example, how many appeals might be made if it is not. As my hon. Friend has said, appeals could be lodged against any of the 1.7 million rateable values in each of the 1990 and 1995 rating lists on the back of the Anston case decision. It is impossible to say how many additional appeals might be generated if the decision was not reversed, but the figure could be 1.7 million.

We have conservatively estimated that there might be as many as 250,000 properties in a sufficient state of disrepair to encourage owners to appeal. Even using that estimate, it is impossible to gauge the degree of the financial implications, but we might be considering a loss of up to £7 billion over the nine years since 1990, or in the worst case scenario, up to £49 billion if all 1.7 million properties are taken into account. Hon. Members should treat the matter seriously, realising that a reduction of even just 1 per cent. in rateable values would lead to losses from the non-domestic rating pool of some £140 million in 1998-99 alone.

Hon. Members have inquired about how the Bill affects property maintained in a better-than-average state of repair, asking whether rateable values would be adjusted accordingly. The answer is straightforward: the rateable value of a property will depend on the facts of its case. In principle, however, where premises have been maintained to a higher standard of repair than in other similar properties of their age or in the same area, the higher standards should be disregarded when assessing the property's rateable value.

Similarly, if a fire, for example, were to leave a property incapable of beneficial occupation, the property would be removed from the rating lists, and no rates would be payable until it was repaired. If, however, the fire's effect left the property lettable, disrepair resulting from the fire would be disregarded. In cases in which damage is relatively minor and a property is not rendered incapable of beneficial occupation, the valuation officers should make a valuation on the basis of a state of reasonable repair, except where it would be uneconomic to carry out a particular repair. Where repairs are being carried out, and are clearly economic, they should, quite rightly, be reflected in any valuation.

Some Opposition Members asked whether the Bill would simply increase litigation. We do not believe so. There is considerable case law, in the context of both rating and of landlord and tenant law, on when works to a building comprise a repair, a renovation or an improvement. The precise nature of what is a reasonable state of repair will reflect the facts in each case, but I recognise that Opposition Members have signalled that they will revisit the issue in Committee. We look forward to that debate.

The Opposition suggested that the Bill radically changes the law. We do not believe so. We cannot answer for what valuers believed, but valuation officers have since 1990 valued property on the assumption that it is in a reasonable state of repair. That assumption underlies the values that appear in both the 1990 and 1995 rating lists. Moreover, it is the only practical means of ensuring that ratepayers are treated fairly as regards their rate bills over a five-year period.

The Bill is a worthwhile and necessary measure. It is consistent with good administration and, above all, it will ensure fair treatment and a fair tax assessment for all ratepayers. I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 268, Noes 30.

Division No. 29] **[6.51 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick	Bennett, Andrew F
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*	Benton, Joe
Allen, Graham	Bermingham, Gerald
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*	Berry, Roger
Armstrong, Ms Hilary	Best, Harold
Atherton, Ms Candy	Betts, Clive
Austin, John	Blears, Ms Hazel
Banks, Tony	Borrow, David
Barnes, Harry	Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Barron, Kevin	Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Battle, John	Brinton, Mrs Helen
Bayley, Hugh	Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Beard, Nigel	Browne, Desmond
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret	Buck, Ms Karen

Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny
(Wolverh'ton SW)
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brand, Dr Peter
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gorrie, Donald
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Paul Tyler and
Mr. Paul Burstow.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

RATING (VALUATION) BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Rating (Valuation) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums so payable under any other Act.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

RATING (VALUATION) BILL [*WAYS AND MEANS*]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That any Act resulting from the Rating (Valuation) Bill may impose liability to non-domestic rates by provision about the valuation of hereditaments.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING (SCOTLAND) (S.I., 1998, No. 2913)

That the Town and Country Planning (Minerals) (Scotland) Regulations 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 2913), dated 17th November 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 25th November, be approved.

That the Town and Country Planning (Compensation for Restrictions on Mineral Working and Mineral Waste Depositing) (Scotland) Regulations 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 2914), dated 17th November 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 25th November, be approved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Quentin Davies be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Mr. Robert Walter be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

School Governing Bodies

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

7.7 pm

Mr. David Taylor (North–West Leicestershire): As a parent of four daughters in full-time education and as one who was once employed in the profession, it has been a pleasure and a privilege for me to be a member of school governing bodies in north-west Leicestershire for more than 20 years. However, there is no comparison between those early years as a governor and now, and nor would I ever want to return to them. The role of governing bodies has changed completely following the implementation of local management of schools introduced by the Education Reform Act 1988. Every survey of governors since then has revealed the great time commitment that the job now involves and has referred to the paper mountain from central and local government and from the schools themselves.

I am delighted that the Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris), is replying to the debate. Since her election to the House, she has used her 18 years as a teaching professional to excellent effect and she is widely respected in the world of education. She knows only too well the impact on governors of the huge changes in the culture of education during the past decade or so.

In the debate on the education White Paper, my hon. Friend said:

"We recognise the important role of governors . . . I am afraid that we have put a further burden on them . . . When the relationship between the governing body and the school is right, it is a tower of strength for the good of the children. When it is not right and when governors feel that they are burdened down with paperwork, it is a matter for concern."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 1997; Vol. 298, c. 656.]

In my visits last year to all schools in north-west Leicestershire, it was clear to me that the Government have every right to be concerned. The chairs of governors of those schools—mainly village primaries—often said that they were drowning in a sea of paper. I requested this debate in an attempt to raise the profile of the issues.

Nationally, there are more than 300,000 governors and they are a huge and valuable resource. However, there is a risk that, as unpaid volunteers, they are being taken for granted and overwhelmed by consultation papers and new duties. Members of all governing bodies are increasingly concerned about the layer upon layer of additional responsibility and work that is being placed upon lay governors. Governors are unpaid volunteers: although they can reclaim expenses for expenditure incurred on behalf of the school, few do so because they are concerned about additional costs on already stretched school budgets. It might seem surprising, but many new governors are still not aware of the commitment and responsibilities that come with being a governor, while more experienced governors feel that they cannot commit more and more time to doing justice to their role. Recently, there has been a much higher turnover of governors in my part of the world, and we are not unique.

The issue is not merely the call on the time of governors—time which so far has been willingly and freely given: there is an enormous information overload.

The continuing inflow of documents for the attention of chairs and members of governing bodies is reaching alarming proportions and is a disincentive for people either to take on, or to continue with, the role of governor. A cursory glance at the commitments for school responses in Leicestershire last term, and for some due early in the current term, reveals eight major consultations by the local education authority: on educational development, lifelong learning, behaviour support, nutritional standards for school meals, fair funding, key stage 1 class sizes, the new deal for schools and early-years child care. Soon, the LEA will be required to hold consultations on asset management, youth work, school organisation, special educational needs provision, youth and community education review, fair funding from April 2000 and the LEA Ofsted action plan. The Minister will appreciate what a daunting agenda that is for governing bodies and head teachers.

I do not criticise the LEAs; they are carrying out statutory responsibilities to consult and would be acting illegally if they did not do so. Central support staff in local authorities are as overwhelmed by those requirements as are governors and school staff. However, at the rate that we are going, something will have to give.

I have referred to the particular pressures of time and to the immense information overload for governors. I now turn to the issue of responsibilities. The increased responsibility in many areas requires a range and level of professionalism and expertise that few lay individuals can reasonably be expected to have. However, what is frequently demanded of governors, especially those who are chairs of governing bodies, now includes the setting of staff pay and conditions, professional development interviews and appraisal of head teachers, and, most importantly, the health and safety legal requirements. Following the delegation of health and safety issues to schools, governors have a corporate responsibility for health and safety regulation and non-compliance might constitute a criminal act that can carry severe penalties.

I have always supported increased freedom for governors in relation to schools and recognise that it brings increased responsibility. I believe that most governors are content to accept that responsibility. However, they are volunteers and they require training and support. Local education authorities are under a specific duty to provide governor training. In Leicestershire, that is very well handled within the limited resources available, but that is not necessarily the case elsewhere. One of the difficulties in providing up-to-date and effective training and support is that guidance material on recent educational initiatives is not as full or as available as would be ideal, nor are the resources typically available to LEAs for such matters anywhere near the levels necessary to help optimise governors' contributions to driving up standards.

The three key roles of governors remain to provide a strategic view, to act as a critical friend and to ensure accountability. The day-to-day pressures are such that the urgent can too often drive out the important. It is easy to forget that one's original intention was to drain the swamp when one is up to one's ears in alligators. Many of the extra pressures on governors that I have described developed in the years following the Education Reform Act 1988, but the past 20 months have posed additional challenges for school governing bodies through the major new duties placed on them.

The Labour Government brought into force certain provisions of the previous Government's Education Act 1997. The new duties now placed on governing bodies include the requirement to make arrangements to adopt a baseline assessment scheme for pupils entering primary education. Governing bodies must now adopt curriculum tests and public examination schemes with locally defined annual targets. There is a new duty on governing bodies and head teachers to provide careers education in years 9 to 11.

Finally, under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, governing bodies are required to ensure that schools meet limits on the size of infant classes; they must conduct the school with a view to promoting higher standards of educational achievement; they must have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State on determining the capability of members of staff; they must set annual school attendance targets; they must adopt a home-school agreement and take reasonable steps to ensure that the parental declaration relating to such agreements is signed by every parent; and they must ensure that any school lunches comply with regulations prescribing nutritional standards. There is an additional duty, to which I have already referred, relating to health and safety of persons on school premises, or taking part in any school activities elsewhere. A recent tragedy in Leicestershire underlines the importance of that new responsibility. I have outlined only a few of the new duties to illustrate the extra challenges posed for governors.

Notwithstanding the changing priorities and despite the limitations on time and resources, the predominant role of any school governing body should be a strategic one. Governors constantly strive to establish high expectations, challenge complacency and provide a practical policy framework within which the school can thrive. However, the key to that is surely to have every post on the governing body filled, some continuity of local and national policies and properly resourced support from the LEA or school.

Governing is a commitment which, if carried out properly, consumes many hours of precious time. Governors are expected to share responsibility for the safe and efficient running of the school. Many governors are in full-time employment and find it difficult to persuade their employers to allow them time away from work to fulfil their widening duties. Some governors have to use days from their precious annual holidays to do that, which compromises their commitments to their own families.

At local schools, governor visits are often used to monitor and evaluate curricular work in the school—in my area, the literacy hour is under review this year. Monitoring and evaluating the curriculum is an area in which governors often feel out of their depth. It is very time consuming if it is to be done properly.

The pressures on chairs of governors are heavy; at different times, I was chair of a small village primary school and of a large upper school. As chair, one's work load is clearly much larger than that of other governors. One is in daily contact with the head teacher to give support, with frequent meetings to discuss special needs, budgets and new directives, to fill in consultation documents, or to consider admissions. The chair probably tries to summarise all the documents coming into the school to make things easier for the other governors. One must often produce much of the governors' report to

[Mr. David Taylor]

parents and write letters to the local authority when one does not agree with its decisions. One must make and consider suggestions for the school's development plan—the list goes on.

I loved the role of chair of governors: it was one of the most interesting voluntary jobs that I have ever done. However, the calls on time and energy can become wholly unreasonable. We are rapidly reaching the position where future candidates for the chair will come only from the ranks of the retired, the unemployed, or those with some other means.

I remember that Sir Ron Dearing recommended that schools should be allowed to work in peace for at least five years. That would have given governors and teachers time to consolidate and improve the new skills that they had had to acquire during the previous 10 years. No one expects the world to stop for them, however, especially when social and economic change is so rapid. Our new Government, with an ambitious agenda to fulfil, produced even more pressure. I was delighted that our top campaign priority was education and that education is a main focus of our actions in government. Nevertheless, we absolutely must carry governors with us. The voluntary commitment of governors is already heavy and the hours are extensive. Many governors feel that even more delegation is undesirable and that governing bodies have been given enough powers and responsibilities to absorb. More paid staff, either in schools or in LEAs, are required to support the governor's role.

When it was known that I had been successful in securing the debate, I received some feedback from local governors with a substantial number of letters, faxes, phone calls and visits from schools in the county of Leicestershire. We should bear in mind that many of those people have performed that role for a decade and more. They have experienced all the changes made by successive Governments and are not harking back to some illusory golden era of governing. I shall quote briefly from that correspondence. The chair of governors at a small village primary school says:

"We are now implementing the various initiatives detailed in the School Standards and Framework Act. I am increasingly concerned that the governor work load is going to become prohibitive. In addition, the increase in governor responsibility and accountability does not seem commensurate with the voluntary nature of serving as a school governor.

I do not think that remuneration for governors—as has been suggested occasionally—is the answer. I do, however, feel that governors are becoming a free substitute for the education authority professionals who are rapidly disappearing as more and more services and administration are devolved into schools.

Aside from the increased role of governors, this devolution of services puts extreme pressure on the staff of small schools."

A second letter states:

"It is slightly alarming to note the rapid way in which the role of school governor has changed over the last year—it may be increasingly difficult to find people who are willing to take on this job in the future."

Another letter says:

"I have been Chair of a local primary school for the past 18 months. During this time, we as a governing body have seen the amount of our work load increase tremendously. The sheer weight of documentation that comes through from the DfEE and the LEA is such that I do not have time to read it all . . . I am aware that many of my colleagues find themselves equally beleaguered. We find ourselves having to concentrate on the everyday issues of running the school rather than focusing on strategic issues and those directly affecting the children within our school.

I became a governor because I cared about my children's education. I now find myself dealing with a whole array of issues which have little or nothing to do with that education.

I have to take responsibility for keeping them warm, safe, fed and partially educated at home. The balance of their education should be provided at school but governors cannot focus on that crucial part because they are too engrossed in the new bureaucracy of governor accountability. Frankly, it is labour on the cheap. Please help".

I pass on to my hon. Friend the Minister that poignant and heartfelt plea.

As a governor in and the Member of Parliament for a constituency containing 50 schools and 12,000 children, I urge the Minister to recognise governors' problems and give them encouragement about the Government's support for them and reassurance about their future role. The weight of work and worry that we are transferring to volunteer governors seems neither sensible nor sustainable. We cannot go on like this.

I am grateful to the Whips for carving out so much time for the Minister to respond to a crucial issue. I look forward to her speech with great interest.

7.22 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): I congratulate the hon. Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) not only on securing the debate, but on getting more than three hours for it.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman also on the many and varied points that he made about the increasing work load faced by our school governors. Over 25 years, I was a governor of different schools in Colchester and, for a time, the chair of a combined board of junior and infant school. Does the Minister think it wise to force schools with a combined governing body to set up separate bodies? As the hon. Member for North–West Leicestershire said, that has made the governor deficit, which exists in many places, even worse. There is a problem in getting sufficient governors to come forward.

I pay tribute to all the governors who have volunteered because, for the reasons that have been mentioned, the job is becoming increasingly difficult. There is more and more delegation, but many of us want some responsibility pulled back to the local education authority. Governors are being swamped with paperwork.

I am concerned about the financial and legal responsibilities faced by governors. In many respects, governing bodies are almost local councils or local firms. They run small businesses that happen to be called schools, but they do not necessarily have professional staff and guidance on tap and must seek it out. I am worried because many experts are now offering their services. Some of their work is paid and some is voluntary. One wonders what they are offering in return. There is a need for more professional staff to be on hand for governing bodies.

The term "labour on the cheap" has been used. I could understand the previous Administration wanting to run schools on the cheap, which is what these developments are about. My work load as a governor was continually extended because the professional staff from county hall and the local education authority were being withdrawn. Some of them set up firms, privatising the administration of our schools.

Will the Government provide the skilled, professional services that hitherto existed and are now increasingly provided by enthusiastic, dedicated people? I acknowledge their enthusiasm and dedication because I was one of them. When I started as a governor, I knew that there were professional staff to support me. I doubt that governors in many schools today have recourse to such staff. Will the Minister explain whether the Government will reverse that trend or proceed with further delegation?

7.26 pm

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on securing this debate. We sometimes pass over the important debates that should take place in the House, such as the issue of school governors and the voluntary work that they enter into when they accept their post. Whether governors work for a primary or secondary school or one of the new colleges, there is a great deal to be done to support education in local communities.

I am receiving representations from local school governors about the funding of schools. The money that has been allocated by the Government over the past 14 or 18 months is being used to clear the debt that some governors had to continue carrying over because of the lack of support for education by the Tory Government. Schools were driven to dispensing with teachers and reducing services to which children are entitled. All that time, many school governing bodies were running a deficit. The money that has been allocated to education has been used, particularly in my constituency, to clear the backlog of debt.

I am sure that now that some of the debt has been cleared, we shall realise the benefit of that money. However, it will take time to clear up the arrears that school governing bodies had to run up because the Tories let down education in many areas. Governing bodies had to make ends meet and reduce their teaching staff.

School governors are often fund raisers, too. They make an effort outside school hours to raise funds to help with out-of-school activities, which were reduced when the Tory Government cut funding for them. We therefore owe a great deal to school governors for helping with the maintenance of education in our communities. Those issues are over and above the legal responsibilities and commitment of school governors and the burdens placed on them, which were outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire.

In many instances, school governors had to dispose of school playing fields to raise money. I am pleased that the Minister and her colleagues are watching that carefully and that there is now an embargo on the sale of school playing fields, which are very important. I hope that we are going to assist school governors with the development of more out-of-school activities such as sports. There are still many problems to solve, problems which members of school governing bodies want to tackle. They want to ensure that their schools can provide out-of-school activities, such as sport and agricultural activities which some teachers wish to introduce. This takes money and time, but school governing bodies in my constituency are working to that end and credit must be given to them.

I support the plea made by my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire that we should recognise the dedication of many of our constituents who are members of school governing bodies and who do a great deal of work to ensure that the best quality education is provided for their communities. I associate myself with his remarks and reiterate his plea to the Minister to accept that there is a call from our communities for school governing bodies to be given a higher profile and greater assistance, through the local education authority in many areas. I hope that the Minister will respond to the points that have been made so that we can highlight through the media our appreciation and recognition of the work of school governing bodies.

7.32 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on securing this Adjournment debate. He is absolutely right to say that governors are key partners in the education service, and their work should be recognised and applauded. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) in welcoming this debate as an opportunity to do exactly that. I am in no doubt that schools work better when they have effective governing bodies to support them. If we were looking at the elements that made a good school, a good and effective chair of governors and governing body would be on that list.

I also welcome the contribution made by the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell). I may have to differ from him on what I believe was his main point. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire that we do not want to go back to the days when governing bodies had no powers and decisions were made by local authorities. The answer to the question that the hon. Member for Colchester put directly to me—whether we would be centralising to local authorities some of the powers latterly given by both Governments to governing bodies—is no. That is perhaps a difference between our two parties.

When we debated the School Standards and Framework Bill in Committee, the Liberals argued strongly that more powers should be given to local authorities. I suspect that the hon. Member for Colchester overstated his case, but the new powers that this Government have given to governing bodies and which were listed by my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire—they relate to target setting, behaviour plans and class size plans—are quite properly the domain of governing bodies. Such decisions about individual schools should be made by those most closely affected.

In a debate like this, we need to remind ourselves that governors are important because they provide the essential link between schools and the communities that they serve. They are independent, which is important, and they play a vital part in making sure that the wider local community is represented.

My hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire will know that the Government have put at the centre of the education debate a wish, a determination and a commitment to raise educational standards in all schools. Certainly, governors and governing bodies have a crucial role to play in that agenda. The legislation that was passed last year for the first time placed a specific responsibility on governing bodies to conduct schools with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement. One might have supposed that that was what

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they were doing anyway, that that was their raison d'etre and that that must be at the centre of what they were doing. However, the legislation made that explicit for the first time, and governing bodies and those who represent them have welcomed that.

It is important to clarify in the new framework for schools exactly what the roles of governing bodies and local authorities are in raising standards. Although the legislation introduces some changes, the broad responsibility of governors remains largely the same as it was before the passage of that legislation.

I understand what my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire said. I accept that the legislation and many of the initiatives that are central to the Government's wish to raise standards have resulted in a flurry of consultation on specific aspects of that legislation, especially in relation to new regulations that will need to take effect before 1 September. I take this opportunity to assure governing bodies that we understand the burden that extra bureaucracy and consultation can place on them and that we want to minimise that burden so far as we are able.

Mr. Bob Russell: Is the Minister saying that governors already have burdens, and are they going to have extra burdens? What sort of central support do they get now, and will they get additional professional support in future?

Ms Morris: I shall come to the latter point in a few minutes. My hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire listed several consultation papers that have been published in the past year. I accept what he said but, in light of the Government's determination to improve standards and put education at the top of their agenda, it would have been strange had we not consulted governing bodies in the determination of that agenda.

The word "burden" has a pejorative ring to it, so I do not want to repeat it. Instead, let me say that there is an acceptance that the new framework and the Government's new initiatives and policies have meant more consultation with governing bodies in the past 18 months than was the case in the previous 18 months. I accept that it has meant an increased work load for governing bodies, but, given the parents' and the nation's wish to do something about the unacceptably low standards of education in some parts of the system, it was an inevitability, and I am happy to justify it. I accept that, having initiated that amount of consultation, it behoves the Government to assist governing bodies to respond to it as efficiently as possible.

Given the consultation that has emanated from recent legislation, I am keen to make sure that the flow of documents to schools from the Department is kept to a minimum. It is important that schools have enough time to respond to the consultation. I am conscious of the fact that, several times in recent months, the Department has issued many documents. Because we wanted to make rapid progress towards higher standards, perhaps there has not always been the amount of time that we would have wished for schools and governing bodies to respond. That is why we are redoubling our efforts to make sure that when consultation papers are sent to schools, governing bodies have at least 10 weeks—excluding school holidays—to respond.

We hope to make further improvements in that regard. For instance—this may be the type of initiative that the hon. Member for Colchester meant—we want to make greater use of sampling. I question whether it is always necessary, when we publish a consultation document, to request and analyse the views of 24,000 governing bodies. One initiative that we have put into effect since we came into government is to consult, on some consultation documents, a sample of schools and a sample of governing bodies.

Some policies are so important that all governing bodies should have the right to respond to the proposals and have their views taken into account by the Government. However, we are trying to develop expertise in sampling. If we can do so, it will no longer be necessary for every governing body to respond fully on every initiative that comes out of the Government before we can assess the response and develop policy further.

A large quantity of paper is generated locally through local authorities' consultation with schools—it does not all come from the Department or from Government bodies. That is why, on 29 July 1998, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment wrote, jointly with the chair of the Local Government Association's education committee, to all chief education officers about the need to reduce the bureaucratic burden on teachers, governing bodies and schools. The local authority education department often acts as a gatekeeper for messages and letters from other council departments to schools. The letter to local education authorities contained a framework covering gatekeeper communications and information requests, and urged local authorities to minimise paperwork.

In the past six months, the Department has run two pilot schemes—one in Kent, which is a large local authority, and one in Derby, which is a much smaller local authority—to discover how local education authorities can identify good practice in dealing with paperwork for governing bodies and others, and how we can spread good practice when identified. Those pilot schemes are taking place this year. We very much hope to learn from them, so that we may ensure that the burden imposed on governing bodies by local authorities is reduced, and so that local authorities may tackle that problem as central Government do.

We have asked local authorities to follow the Department guidelines by providing a simple summary of the issue contained in the document, and by making clear the status of any action that needs to be taken. As a Department, we have been doing that for some time, so in future there should be no need for governing body chairs to summarise documents for the governing body in the way that my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire feelingly described. I acknowledge that problem. The summary of the document now appears clearly on the front of the consultation document, as does a description of the intended audience.

I very much agree with my hon. Friend that the relationship between a governing body—especially its chair—and the head is crucial. If that relationship is not right, it not only creates an extra work load for governors, but interferes with the proper running of the school and the raising of standards for children.

There must be a clear division of responsibility between governing bodies and head teachers. For years, guidance from the Department has consistently emphasised the

strategic role of a governing body and the distinction between governance and management. We want to go further, to clarify that relationship. In the description of some governing bodies that was read to us by my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire, it was unclear whether, in the schools that he was describing or quoting, the partners were clear about their responsibilities and acted accordingly. I accept that that relationship needs working at. It needs good will, and it needs to be talked about and clarified. Because of governing bodies' enthusiasm for their work, it is easy for them to impinge on what is properly the role of head teachers.

The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 enables us to make regulations. We set out the terms of reference for governing bodies. We shall use those regulations to set out the distinct roles and responsibilities of governing bodies and head teachers more clearly than ever before.

We do not intend to use those regulations to set out a long list of the responsibilities placed on governing bodies. My hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire mentioned those responsibilities. However, it is important to note that, although the law places responsibilities on governing bodies to make sure—those are important words—that statutory responsibilities are met, the law certainly does not require governing bodies to carry out those functions themselves. Governing bodies, heads and schools need to be clear in their minds about where the duty to make sure that the law is kept, and the duty to carry out what is required by law, start and end.

My hon. Friend especially mentioned governing body responsibility for health and safety. Governors' legal responsibility in that regard has not changed. Under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 and associated regulations, employers in schools are responsible for the health, safety and welfare of their employees. I am aware of the tragic incident that my hon. Friend mentioned. I understand the impact that it must have had on those concerned, and the importance that it has in his community. I understand that the matter is now being investigated by the Health and Safety Executive, and that the results of the inquest are still awaited.

I do not accept all my hon. Friend's comments. It was necessary to bring legislation into one document, to meet the responsibilities of governing bodies within the new framework of schools. Much of it carried forward the contents of previous documents meeting a different framework of schools, and reiterated them in one body. We have placed on schools new responsibilities on target setting, for behaviour support plans, and to reduce class sizes to 30 for infant school children. Those are things that we would want the Government to do. They are things that parents would want us to do.

Sometimes a balance must be achieved; I understand the difficulties. On one hand, there is a desire for stability and no increase in work, and on the other, there is an acceptance that things had to change because things were not all right. I know that my hon. Friends the Members for North–West Leicestershire and for Normanton share that acceptance.

I always ask teachers, governing bodies and others to bear in mind the guiding principle that if the extra responsibility is about raising standards for children, we should all take on that responsibility. If it is a responsibility that stands in the way of raising standards for children, we should object to that responsibility. That is the guideline as to whether the extra responsibility is a burden or whether it is part of the wider standards agenda.

I am aware, as my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire must be aware, that a recent Ofsted inspection of Leicestershire identified LEA governor vacancies on school governing bodies as a particular problem. It may offer my hon. Friend some assurance to know—although I am not pleased about it—that the problem is not unique to Leicestershire. Governing bodies need to have all their places filled to cope with their work. Leaving vacancies is not an acceptable practice as far as LEA nominees are concerned. Schools need complete governing bodies, and I agree with my hon. Friend that in small schools in rural areas, where the governing body is smaller to begin with, vacancies can place an unacceptable burden on the rest of the governing body. I hope that, when local authorities are unable to fill their places, they will be prepared to consider a wider range of individuals, including nominations from governing bodies.

I understand that Leicestershire is now considering what to do in light of the Ofsted inspectors' findings, and I hope that the local authority will look at the issue more flexibly than it may have done in the past. My hon. Friend may be interested to know the results of some research that surprised me—research recently commissioned by the Department, and carried out by the university of London institute of education, into improving the effectiveness of school governing bodies. Some of the project's findings are relevant to questions about work load and recruitment. For example, less than 10 per cent. of governors in the sample said that their work load was not reasonable. Interestingly, in a similar sample, more than 50 per cent. of head teachers thought that the work load on their governors was unreasonable. There is a mismatch in those results; it is almost as though head teachers were protecting governors. Head teachers showed much more concern about governing bodies' work loads than governors themselves. We must think hard about what that difference in perception means.

The same research confirms data obtained from local authorities following the 1996 governor recruitment campaign: most schools do not experience significant difficulties in recruiting governors. In saying that, I am not minimising the problems for schools that do so. Many such schools are more challenging and in less affluent areas, where parents often do not have the confidence to stand as governors. With that in mind, the Department will be working with LEA governor training co-ordinators to produce information aimed at recruiting new governors to serve on reconstituted governing bodies from September.

The Government have a good story to tell in supporting and training governors. This year's standards fund includes earmarked funding for governor training in the school effectiveness category. That is the first time for several years that governor training has been earmarked. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire will welcome that. Governor training expenditure under the previous Government had declined to about £6 million, but, under our Government, expenditure on training governors across all categories of

[Ms Morris]

the standards fund is estimated to be about £10 million. We have specifically asked that in all schools, there is at least one governor who is trained in target-setting.

We want to ensure that high-quality training is available to all governors. We are concerned not just with making training happen, but with its quality. That is why we are planning to issue guidance on how governor training needs can best be met, based on the best LEA practice. I am aware that not all governors take up the training opportunities available to them. Some misguidedly think that, in taking money to train themselves, they are using part of the school's budget that could be spent on pupils. I know that all hon. Members who have spoken in this debate agree that governing bodies ought to use the money that has been set aside for training. That is in the interests not only of governors, but of schools and pupils.

We are working hard to ensure that departmental publications for governors are more user friendly. There is much work to be done by the Government on that; we always need to keep our eye on the ball and to update matters. A good example of such a publication is "The Governors' Guide to the Law". We have provided every governor with a copy, and we shall be revising it later this year to take account of the School Standards and Framework Act. As mentioned in the Green Paper on the teaching profession, "Meeting the Challenge of Change", we shall also be looking at providing more targeted advice for governors on specific issues such as appraisal, in order to make it easier for governors to identify exactly their responsibilities.

It is interesting that all Members who have spoken in the debate have been school governors. That is why they spoke with passion. The fact that they have contributed to this debate shows not only concern for schools, standards and pupils in their communities, but an understanding of the governing body's role. The House is fortunate to have many Members who have served as governors. That should further reassure present governors that their role and importance is truly acknowledged and will not be forgotten.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire—and others who have spoken—can take back not only to the governors who have written to him in order that their comments could be part of this debate, but to every school in his constituency, the fact that the Secretary of State and I and other Ministers are deeply indebted to governors for their work. We extend our thanks to them for the time that they put in, the challenges that they meet and the positive role that they play as partners in the education service. They are volunteers; they can choose to do different things with their time. They can choose to do what others do when they are not working or with their families. I think that they choose to continue to be governors because they know that their contribution can make a better school.

I accept on behalf of the Government that, not only because of the contribution that governors make, but because getting their role right is crucial to the standards agenda, we, too, have an obligation to ensure that their work is acknowledged in this House and outside. We shall do all that we can to ensure that governors are able to carry out their important task as efficiently and as unburdened as possible.

I have taken note of the comments made in this debate, and I assure hon. Members that I shall reflect on them. Although I am not pretending that everything is as unbureaucratic as it can possibly be, there is no going back from the important role that governors play in schools, for which I thank them. I thank, too, my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire for allowing the House to pay tribute to governors and to discuss this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 12 January 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Greenhouse Gases

1. **Mr. Andrew Stunell** (Hazel Grove): What representations he made at COP4—the fourth conference of the parties—on the trading of greenhouse gas emission permits as a mechanism for annexe 1 countries to meet their targets under the Kyoto protocol. [63565]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): During his address to the recent climate change meeting in Buenos Aires, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister spoke of the importance of domestic policies to tackle climate change, while recognising the need to continue dialogue with other countries to develop rules for emissions trading. The rules must ensure environmental effectiveness as well as economic efficiency.

Mr. Stunell: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he agree that mounting evidence of the severe impact of climate change means that any scheme for trading emissions must include secure monitoring and sensible transitional arrangements? Can he persuade the United States Government in particular to accept the reality of climate change and the need to take very prompt action?

Mr. Meacher: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I played a significant role at the historic Kyoto meeting in shifting the United States from its zero target to a cut of 7 per cent. by the end of the conference. I cannot guarantee that we shall have the same success again, but we are committed to establishing a fair ceiling. It is written in the protocol that domestic action is the key issue and that flexible mechanisms must be supplementary to it. We shall be making every effort to ensure that that ceiling is in place, properly monitored and transparent.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, thanks to the previous Government's leading role in this area and his acceptance of our policies, this country is very well placed not only to give a lead, but to bring others on board, including the United States? He said something about mechanisms that he proposes to use in order to bring that about. Will he also tell the House about his timetable, thereby dispelling the accusation of Friends of the Earth that the Buenos Aires conference set an agenda for inaction?

Mr. Meacher: Our only inheritance from the previous Government in respect of climate change was the closure of more than half of this country's remaining pits, which was not, of course, in any sense aimed at an environmental objective. It had a completely different provenance. We of course intend to reach the targets. As a result of the significant role that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I also played at the Buenos Aires conference, there is agreement for the first time among 160 countries on an action programme, which incorporates targeted deadlines. There are at least three in the work programme that was agreed. We intend to meet them—if we can, by COP6.

Right to Buy

2. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What estimate his Department has made of the impact on take-up rates of his decision to reduce the discounts to council tenants under the right-to-buy arrangements. [63566]

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): About 1 per cent. of council and housing association tenants exercise their right to buy each year. We estimate that about 90 per cent. of buyers will be unaffected by the changes to discounts, and of the rest—0.1 per cent. of social tenants—many will still be able to buy. We expect the percentage of social tenants buying their home to remain at about 1 per cent. each year.

Mr. Swayne: Do Ministers want to encourage tenants to aspire to own their own homes?

Ms Armstrong: Our commitment to home ownership is very clear. We want to ensure that anyone has a realistic chance and a sustainable opportunity to buy their own home. We also have a duty to the taxpayer to ensure that any programme that we introduce is value for money. The programme costs the taxpayer about £400 million a year. We think that we can get better value for money.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Is my hon. Friend aware of the recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "Reviewing the Right to Buy", which raises some concerns about changes to right-to-buy discounts, especially the effects on social exclusion? It argues for a flat-rate purchase grant instead of discounts. Will she comment on its proposals?

Ms Armstrong: I am aware of that report, which we are considering—as part of the general consultation. We have received representations from around the country, including the local authority of the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), which fully supports our proposals. We will take into account all those representations, along with the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Does the Minister recall that her party has historically been

opposed to the right to buy for council house tenants, and that it has been motivated by both ideology and spite? The measure to cut the discount by £12,000 in London and £38,000 in the north-east will be seen as nothing less than that. Does she accept that that will cause hardship to tenants hoping to buy their houses? Is she prepared to introduce transitional relief to lessen the impact of that attack on home ownership?

Ms Armstrong: Once again the hon. Gentleman gets his facts wrong. The Labour party did not oppose the principle of the right to buy—*[Interruption.]* We said that money should be invested in social housing to make sure that people in the rest of the country who needed houses could get them.

Mr. Burns: Stop digging.

Ms Armstrong: I am not digging. It is the hon. Gentleman who has dug deep and cannot get out. We are in favour of home ownership, but we are also in favour of people who rely on social tenancies having a decent choice. That is why we have allocated £5 billion to put right social housing, which the Conservative Government neglected. For the first time in the history of surveying, council housing conditions deteriorated under the previous Administration. We will put a stop to that.

Devolved Budgets

3. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): If he will make a statement on the status of the leaked document relating to control by the Scottish Parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies of budgets currently managed in London. [63567]

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): My hon. Friend should know that Governments do not comment on leaked documents.

Mr. Dalyell: How about putting in the Library of the House the respectable case for central funding?

Mr. Caborn: I am speaking not on behalf of the Library of the House, but for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I do not believe that that comes within our expenditure.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): Bearing in mind the fact that the Minister's answers on the point raised by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) will be recorded in the *Official Report*, does the Minister believe that it would have been better for the issue to have been raised in public, rather than appearing in a leaked memo, and for the House to have had the opportunity for scrutiny and debate?

Mr. Caborn: We deplore all leaks from Government Departments, but there has been adequate time to discuss on the Floor of the House and in Committee the financial arrangements for devolution for Scotland, and there is secondary legislation dealing with that as well.

Home Buying and Selling

4. **Dr. Doug Naysmith** (Bristol, North-West): What representations have been received as a result of the Government's consultation on reform of the processes of home buying and selling. [63568]

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): "The key to easier home buying and selling" was published on 7 December 1998. Since then, there has been a steady stream of responses on a wide range of issues. The consultation period ends on 31 March 1999.

Dr. Naysmith: In view of the interest that has been shown, is there any possibility of speeding up the process and starting to take action more quickly?

Ms Armstrong: The matter has probably raised more interest among the public than any of the other consultation documents that we have issued. It is, therefore, important that we get it right. There has been considerable concern about the home buying and selling process. The Government decided to improve the situation so that people would know what they were getting into if they sought to buy their home, and so that they would have more confidence in the process. I agree with my hon. Friend about the need to speed up the process of home buying and selling. That is the weakness in the British system. To do that effectively, we need a proper period of consultation. We are committed to introducing proposals for action this year.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister accept that we might all wish to speed up the process of house transfer, but that there are great dangers in imposing serious financial obligations on vendors? They might be required to pay for searches and surveys that might then go out of date before a potential purchaser was identified. Will she recognise the great concern, expressed by many professionals in this area, that the Government's thinking on this may be rather skewed?

Ms Armstrong: We had the most extensive consultation ever with the professions in this area before we published the consultation document, and they were very involved in drawing it up. It is a Government document and the professions are now considering it in great detail. Anyone who reads it in full will see that it recognises the down sides of proposals as well as their benefits. Any consultation must take account of views on both sides, and we shall seek to do that. However, we are determined to improve the process, which brings frustration to many.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Does my hon. Friend accept that the slowness at which houses in Britain are sold is a substantial problem, and that if we could speed up the process, it might be unnecessary to build quite so many new houses—the 4.4 million that Conservative and Labour Members alike are keen should not be built on green land? Does my hon. Friend agree that, if house turnover is improved, there will be slightly less need to build new ones?

Ms Armstrong: I do not want to make assumptions that have not been fully researched, but my hon. Friend

may have a point. Other countries manage to get through the process much more speedily than we in Britain do, so we must consider what improvements can be made. That may bring the wider benefits of which my hon. Friend speaks; it will certainly bring benefits for consumers and citizens, for so many of whom this is the most important financial decision in their lives. They want the system to work better.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): Will the Minister comment on reports that her Government's urban task force is to recommend that those who own or buy houses on green-field sites should lose the right to mortgage tax relief? Does she accept that, although it is principally country dwellers who object to urban encroachment on green spaces, it would be a bit much even for her Government to expect only country dwellers to pay to prevent that?

Ms Armstrong: I am not sure how that point can be taken into account in the consultation on the home buying and selling process, but the right hon. Lady shows some ingenuity. All I would say is that she should not believe everything that she hears on the radio.

Regional Development Agency (Yorkshire and Humberside)

5. **Mr. Jeff Ennis** (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): When the regional development agency in Yorkshire and Humberside will be officially established. [63569]

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): Regional development agencies for the eight English regions outside London were established on 14 December 1998 when the chairmen and board members were appointed. They will take over their executive functions on 1 April 1999.

Mr. Ennis: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply, which I am sure will be extremely well received by many people and organisations in Yorkshire and Humberside. Does my hon. Friend agree that the new RDA will be an excellent vehicle for driving forward the agenda of a better inward investment strategy for the region, as well as promoting better co-operation between the training and enterprise councils, both of which are critical to the future successful regeneration of Yorkshire and Humberside?

Mr. Caborn: Absolutely. The RDAs will consider matters strategically. The previous Conservative Government left my hon. Friend's sub-region of South Yorkshire, with Rotherham, Doncaster and Barnsley, performing at around 66 per cent. of GDP per capita relative to the European regions' average. That is the dire mess in which the previous Administration left us. We are intent on tackling that in partnership with all the stakeholders in the regions. As my hon. Friend said, the TECs and inward investment will have an important role in that.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): What concrete steps does the Minister envisage to prevent subsidy warfare on inward investment among the development agencies and, notably, between them and the Scottish Executive? When will he publish the concordat which, it is alleged, sets out the rules of the game between Scotland and its Parliament and the English regions?

Mr. Caborn: Common sense already prevails within the regional development agencies: three of the northern development agencies have already come together in relation to inward investment from north America. On the wider question of the United Kingdom, we shall return to that matter in a few weeks with the concordat on inward investment that we promised the House, and we shall deliver on that in the near future.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I congratulate my hon. Friend on handling the introduction of regional development agencies with such speed. That is to the benefit of the regions. Some of the agencies in the regions were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis), but others should be working with the regional development agencies, including local authorities through their chambers. Will my hon. Friend ensure that there will be co-ordination of agencies to the best advantage of the regions, especially Yorkshire and Humberside?

Mr. Caborn: Yorkshire and Humberside region was the first to get the regional chambers up and running; indeed, there is partnership between the chambers, which are mainly in the public sector, and the regional development agencies, which are mainly in the private sector. All the signs to date are that a strong working relationship is developing for the betterment of the eight English regions. Not one English region outside London is not performing above the average of the European regions in wealth creation, in GDP per capita terms.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Under regional development agencies, will Ministers still be able to favour their own constituencies in priorities for spending programmes? For example, how can the Department justify committing £53 million to the A1033 Hedon road improvement scheme in Kingston upon Hull ahead of so many other equally, or more, deserving schemes in other regions, such as the £41 million A63 Selby bypass, or the A3 Hindhead bypass, which is not in the Government's programme at all? Could it be that the Deputy Prime Minister is anti-car everywhere, except in his own constituency?

Mr. Caborn: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman's question has to do with regional development agencies; it shows marked ignorance on his part, because the matter does not come under their remit. However, in respect of the transport part of his question—which, I have no doubt, my hon. Friends with responsibility for transport matters will answer—that point was in the list of priorities that we set before the House and, indeed, was agreed by the House.

Integrated Transport Policy

6. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): What progress is being made in implementing the integrated transport policy. [63570]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I am pleased that my White Paper on the future of transport has been widely welcomed—*[Laughter.]* Every newspaper and every media programme endorsed the White Paper as the first step towards an integrated transport policy—something that the previous Government failed to establish. The White Paper was followed by the publication of daughter documents on roads, railways, road charging and shipping policy. Good progress is being made on the wide range of measures needed to deliver a better transport system for everyone, which we promised at the election.

Mr. Griffiths: Will my right hon. Friend ensure that pressures on the legislative programme do not hinder the implementation of an integrated transport system, which is threatened by non-Labour councils such as SNP-controlled Moray, which increased fares for elderly people and those with disabilities by up to 2,000 per cent?

Mr. Prescott: The 81 recommendations in the transport White Paper involve only 10 requiring legislative provision, six of which have already been provided. Many of the other 71 provisions are already being implemented; £150 million was provided for rural bus services, which has transformed such services in a number of areas. We are changing things: there will be a new railway regulator, a new franchise director and a new strategic rail authority, all of which will contribute to a better transport system with the provision of a record amount of £1.8 billion. That compares very favourably to the previous Administration's inadequate provisions.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): The right hon. Gentleman will know that Liberal Democrat-controlled Dorset county council and Labour-controlled Weymouth and Portland borough council have as their No. 1 priority the building of the brown route that is desperately needed to ensure that we can utilise the port of Portland, which was abandoned by the Ministry of Defence. We are asked to send in more and more bids, but we never get a decision. When shall we have a decision?

Mr. Prescott: What the hon. Gentleman has said about the failure to obtain a decision is as relevant to 18 years of a Tory Government as it is to 18 months of the current Administration. It appears that, all of a sudden, the priority of Opposition Members is to start finding out what is wrong with our transport system. Under this Government, an integrated transport system has been established for the first time. We have provided resources for that system, which will begin to be delivered this year and should be completed by the time of the next election.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Those are welcome measures, but can my right hon. Friend assure us that the role of the bus in the integrated transport policy will be to meet social as well as commercial needs? People—especially in my constituency, and especially elderly people—currently feel that they are being given a raw deal by bus operators. It is difficult for them even to travel to local shops and hospitals, particularly if they live just outside the main, profitable routes.

Mr. Prescott: As the White Paper says, the bus will play an extremely important part in providing alternatives to private transport. More and more people are already using buses, both in cities and in rural areas. A new type of bus—the low-floor bus—is being provided in rural areas, and the evidence shows that services are more frequent. Moreover, new services to hospitals and railway stations are now being provided, because of the commitment that we have given to public transport. I assure my hon. Friend that the bus will play an extremely important part in our transport system.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The White Paper is welcome, but early action would be more welcome. Can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm reports that he hopes to introduce a Bill to provide a strategic rail authority during the current parliamentary year as a result of changes in the House of Lords relating to the European Parliamentary Elections Bill? Can he give us any idea when there will be a guarantee of a bus fares discount for pensioners throughout the country? Many areas currently do not provide such a discount, although, according to the estimate of the Minister for Transport in London, it would cost only £25 million.

Mr. Prescott: The Government are committed to introducing a national minimum concessionary fare for pensioners, which would indeed cost about £25 million. I believe that only three local authorities provide no concessionary fares—all of them Tory controlled, which is hardly surprising, although so many Opposition Members talk of the importance of public transport. We also hope to introduce legislation to provide a strategic rail authority during the current Session, although, as the hon. Gentleman knows, that will depend very much on what happens in the other place. I am already in the process of establishing a shadow strategic rail authority, whose chairman will be appointed next month.

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, as a result of the Government's reinvestment in rural transport, five villages in my constituency, between Harwich and Clacton, are now linked? Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will continue that investment, and will try to repair the damage caused by the deregulation of buses under the previous Government?

Mr. Prescott: As my hon. Friend implies, deregulation led to fewer buses on which fewer people travelled, which cost a great deal more. That is the opposite of what we intend, as the White Paper says. My hon. Friend has already seen the benefits of the extra resources that we have put into rural areas to begin to reverse the decline, and to provide public transport for people who desperately need it and were robbed of it by the last Administration.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Surely the right hon. Gentleman agrees that one of the most integrated transport policies is represented by the Jubilee line and its role in the millennium celebrations. If it is not fully operational by the end of the year, will the right hon. Gentleman resign?

Mr. Prescott: The extended Jubilee line will be operational by the end of the year, but what the hon. Gentleman says is a bit of a cheek, coming from someone who was a member of the Government who began the

project nearly seven years ago. The line is still not ready, primarily because of the contract entered into by that Government, which did not guarantee completion in time for the millennium celebrations.

Social Housing

7. **Mr. Adrian Sanders** (Torbay): If he will make a statement on investment in social housing. [63571]

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Over the life of this Parliament, we are making available nearly £5 billion extra for investment in housing, fulfilling our manifesto commitment to reinvest set-aside capital receipts from the sale of council housing to build new homes and to rehabilitate existing ones. Most of those resources will be invested in social housing.

Mr. Sanders: The Minister will remember a reply that he gave me on 14 December, which laid out expenditure by the previous Government of some £35 billion over the lifetime of that Government, and showed that the amount that was committed so far or predicted for 1999–2000 was £14 billion, leaving a shortfall of £20,766,000,000 in housing expenditure. Is the Minister saying that the amount that will be spent in the final two years of this Government's life will be less or more than £20 billion?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman clearly has difficulty with figures. May I, therefore, remind him of the truth about housing investment? Over the lifetime of the previous Government, there was a consistent and dramatic decline in housing investment. We inherited a budget of only £1.5 billion for capital investment. That has already been increased to almost £2 billion in the current year and it will rise to £3 billion by 2000–01. That is a doubling of the capital investment that we inherited. I am surprised that the Liberal Democrats do not welcome that.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does the Minister agree that it is incontestable that the release of capital receipts has provided a huge boost for investment in social housing, but that that needs to be seen against the backdrop of the massive cut in social housing expenditure under the last Conservative Government; no area of public expenditure was cut as much? Therefore, as long as the Government remain in office—beyond the next general election, I hope—we need year-on-year, real-terms increases in social housing investment.

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I am sorry only that the Liberal Democrats do not appreciate it. Following the dramatic cut in housing investment during the lifetime of the previous Parliament, we have begun the process of restoring decent levels of capital investment. Year on year, we are projecting increased investment, so that, by 2001–02, capital investment in housing will be double that which we inherited from the previous Government.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): As social housing can, I understand, be built in villages and outside villages and towns, even though the local plan forbids housing development beyond the plan, will the Minister comment on whether he supports the passing by the Liberal Democrats in Devon of plans for 90,000 new houses in the countryside in Devon? Would he not want to give some incentive to building on brown-field sites in towns and some disincentive to building on green-field sites in the countryside?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman has obviously been asleep if he has not been aware of the emphasis that has been placed by the Government on increasing the focus on building on brown-field sites. At the beginning of last year, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister published an important paper that set out our proposals for increasing the proportion of housing to be built on brown-field sites. We will shortly publish an interim report from the urban taskforce which has been looking at the matter and many other initiatives are in hand, but, ultimately, it will be for individual local authorities to see how they can best meet the housing needs of their area and ensure that, within their area, the maximum possible, which will vary from area to area, is achieved on brown-field sites.

West Coast Main Line

8. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): What recent discussions he has had with train operating companies on the west coast main line; and if he will make a statement. [63572]

The Minister of Transport (Dr. John Reid): Madam Speaker, happy new year, by the way.

On 26 November, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I met all the train operating companies and Railtrack, to identify the problems and to begin to put in place some of the solutions to the lack of performance on the railway system. We are convinced that the action plan that we put in place at that time will begin to deliver enhancements this year.

Dr. Starkey: I am sure that all the train-operating companies that serve my constituents will have made it clear to the Minister that they welcome the upgrading of the west coast main line and the positive effect that that will have on the reliability of their services. However, I am concerned—it is a concern shared by the Midland Rail Users Consultative Committee—about the effect—[Hon. Members: "Reading."] I am reading the report. I am concerned about the effect that the passenger upgrade on the fast line may have on the capacity for services on the slow line. My particular concern is that, in my constituency, as well as in central Milton Keynes, the stations at Wolverton and Bletchley are served largely by stopping services. I know that the train operating companies, Silverlink and Connex, are concerned that there will be insufficient capacity on the slow line for them to accommodate the current service frequencies as well as the freight that uses that line. They wish to be assured that they will be able to expand on those lines. Will the Minister take that up with the rail regulator and ensure that he makes sure that services can expand on the slow line so that all my constituents benefit from the west coast main line upgrade?

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend will know that the form and timing of the freight upgrade is a matter for discussion.

I met the chief executive of Railtrack on 15 November to discuss a range of issues related to that, but no formal proposals have yet been received from Railtrack. Obviously, when they are put forward, they will be considered. I can tell my hon. Friend that the rail regulator has obliged Railtrack to examine how it can meet the capacity or requirements of all west coast main line operators as a condition of approving the Virgin Rail-Railtrack passenger upgrade 2 deal. I expect to see the fruits of that in Railtrack's March 1999 network management statement.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will the Minister accept that a west coast main line upgrade will be welcome to my constituents who access that line at Milton Keynes or Rugby, but that what has been said is a matter of concern, particularly in relation to slower services to Northampton and to the provision of rail freight services? Will the Minister ensure that it is watched most carefully so that the upgrade takes place but with the various interests being properly balanced?

Dr. Reid: As I said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), the regulator has obliged Railtrack to take that into account when looking at the passenger upgrade. No formal proposals have yet been received on the freight upgrade, but hon. Members will be aware of the fact that, although there will be major advantages in various forms as a result of the freight upgrade, there may also be various drawbacks in terms of interruption to all passenger services, not just the slow passenger services. Those are important matters, but the major issue is that the House will welcome—I hope in a non-partisan fashion—the fact that, after 18 years of damn all investment on the west coast main line, this Government are doing something.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that it is now quite exciting to travel on the west coast main line, especially at the weekends? For the first time ever, no printed timetable has been issued to passengers, on the somewhat spurious basis that, as Railtrack is doing so much work, nobody can really say when the trains will be running. Would my right hon. Friend care to point out to the train companies that, if the passengers have to guess when the trains are running, they might also like to guess which train companies they would like to have running the service after the next franchising round?

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend has amply illustrated one of the reasons why there are few more exciting journeys than travelling with her on the west coast main line, which I have done on a number of occasions. My hon. Friend has made a valid point and she will be pleased to hear that the subject was raised by me, and, more importantly, by the Deputy Prime Minister at the meeting on 26 November and in writing thereafter. Passengers should not be expected to wander blindly, as my hon. Friend said, guessing the times of trains. It is bad enough trying to find the way through the complexities of some of the differentiated and compartmentalised train timetables now that we have 25 train operating companies, without those companies deciding not to issue timetables in the first place.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Is the Minister aware of the regular inconvenience caused to passengers on the west coast main line by the unserviceability of the escalators connecting the main line station at Euston to the London underground? On one day last month, underground trains on the Victoria line did not stop at Euston because there were so many escalators out of action. When London Underground suffers problems with escalators, they are out of action not just for weeks but for months. Will the right hon. Gentleman have a severe word with representatives of London Underground, tell them that they have to do better and report to the House that they are going to do better?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman has a cheek. I am not fully aware of the minutiae of the mechanisms of the escalator to which he referred, but I have no doubt about why it does not work: it is part of the £8,000 million backlog of underinvestment in the underground by the previous Government. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that, as in so many other areas, we intend to remedy that situation through a public-private partnership, which we are currently delivering. In addition, we have made short-term enhancements through our action plan for the rest of the railways, including 800 new drivers, 500 new units of rolling stock to be delivered this year, a task force on railway congestion blackspots, a shadow strategic rail authority and more investment in the railways than ever before. I understand the hon. Gentleman's complaint about one escalator, but I hope that he recognises that that problem, along with the destruction of many other aspects of Britain's social fabric, is a direct result of the negligence of his Government for 18 years.

Train Services

9. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley): What plans he has to ensure that train companies provide an improved service to passengers. [63573]

22. **Mr. Eric Martlew** (Carlisle): What measures he has taken to ensure that train companies improve their services for passengers. [63587]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): In November 1997, we agreed a concordat with the rail regulator and issued new statutory instructions and guidance to the franchising director, requiring him to put passengers' interests first, which the previous Government failed to do.

We are in the process of making three key appointments to strengthen passenger interests: a new chairman of British Rail, who will be prospective chairman of the strategic rail authority; a new franchising director, who will be the prospective chief executive of the SRA; and a new rail regulator.

On 26 November last year, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport and I met representatives of all the passenger train companies and Railtrack to discuss the continuing performance problems and to thrash out a plan for immediate action. That included the provision of 800 new train drivers, 500 new vehicles and a new national passenger survey. On 25 February a rail summit will be held in London to deal with ensuring the longer-term improvements that we want.

Ann Clwyd: In addition to the items on that impressive list, my right hon. Friend has spent a considerable amount

of time on ensuring the continuing safety of passengers travelling through the channel tunnel. I should like him to investigate an incident that took place on 3 December when a Select Committee group was returning from Brussels on Eurostar. The train was halted at Calais for more than two hours for what we were told were security reasons. No explanation of those reasons was given. Will he also investigate why luggage does not pass through the same screening process at Brussels as at Waterloo? When we returned from Brussels, our luggage was not checked.

Mr. Prescott: I am concerned about what my hon. Friend says. I do not know about the details. I shall investigate the matter and write to her about it. She was able to ride on Eurostar because we rescued the failing financial deal on the channel tunnel rail link.

Mr. Martlew: May I bring my right hon. Friend back to the west coast main line, in which I have taken an interest for many years? I am sure that he is aware that that line provides a poor service and has a very bad reputation for punctuality. Much of that is due to Virgin's incompetence, but it is also due to the fact that Railtrack is failing to maintain the line. Is he aware that Railtrack has decided to cut back drastically on planned maintenance on the west coast main line, resulting in the loss of 17 jobs in my constituency? Can my right hon. Friend take any sanctions against Virgin or Railtrack for failing to provide an adequate service on the west coast?

Mr. Prescott: I well understand my hon. Friend's frustration with the west coast main line. As he well knows, when I was an Opposition transport spokesman, I was in his constituency when I proposed a new way of privatising that line. It is a pity that the previous Government did not adopt my ideas as, if they had, we would now be riding on a modernised west coast main line instead of facing the current difficulties. The rail industry has shown shortsightedness by creating redundancies that have led to reductions in investment and in the quality of services. A good example was when the train operating companies made thousands of train drivers redundant and then found that they had no train drivers to deliver the services, hence the recent crash programme to find new train drivers. I am concerned by such reports. Railtrack is attending the rail summit and a strategic rail authority will advocate the interests of the travelling public much more effectively than in the past.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Did the meeting last November that the Secretary of State attended with the Minister of Transport include a discussion of fares policy? Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, since privatisation, fares on the privatised rail companies have gone down in real terms, in stark contradistinction to the fares on the publicly owned London Underground, which have increased way above inflation? At the very least, will he seek to devise a policy so that, from now on, fare increases on London Underground are directly related to improvements in performance?

Mr. Prescott: It is very much the intention of the Government to achieve the quality of service that will be reflected in the fares, although a higher priority is to get more investment into railway systems that have not been improved for the past decade or so, and particularly the underground. Along with the rail regulator and the franchising director, we shall be looking at precisely how the fares system fits into that. The agreement with the operating companies is currently being reviewed by the rail regulator and the franchising director.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Is the Secretary of State aware of the absolute contempt with which his rail and transport policies are regarded in Oxfordshire? Does he have a view to offer my constituents in west Oxfordshire, who every day hope for a better rail service, but are no longer able to park at the station because there are insufficient spaces? While the right hon. Gentleman promotes his integrated transport policy, his Highways Agency closes the A34, has no consultation with the train companies to provide extra services and, in the past few months, has managed to bring the roads of Oxfordshire to a complete halt.

Mr. Prescott: I am a little confused by the hon. Gentleman's comments, as rural areas in Oxfordshire have very much welcomed our rural grants and improved services, so I assume that they feel that the integrated transport policy is well worth it. Oxford city council, which is very much to the fore in developing the policy, is looking forward to the local transport plans announced in our White Paper, which provide something like £800 million. Parking is a problem in most cities. If my memory serves me well, there are park-and-ride facilities in Oxford which we wish to encourage and which are working successfully. There is demand for more such schemes, in the city of York, for example. The hon. Gentleman's comments do not fit into the facts of the case.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Would it be possible for my right hon. Friend to suggest to Richard Branson that he should forget about the pleasures of balloon flying and travel in his own trains so that he can find out what a misery that is? I speak as one who uses the train service regularly. What a dismal failure transport privatisation has turned out to be.

Mr. Prescott: It is generally agreed that there has not been an improvement in the quality of the rail system following privatisation. I did not think that that was in dispute. However, we must improve the quality of the service, get the extra investment that is needed and make sure that the system is much more accountable in the passengers' interest. I have just announced some of the measures by which I think we will achieve that, and I will make them clear at the rail summit on 25 February in London. We will be able to make many points at the summit, and we will look at the long-term changes that people want. To be honest, I do not think that people really care whether the railway is privately or publicly owned—they just want a good system. I may feel that the system might be better under private or public ownership, but we have what we have and we intend to make it better.

Rolling Stock

10. **Mr. Paul Burstow** (Sutton and Cheam): What plans he has to require rolling stock companies to make

arrangements with the franchising director and train operating companies for the planned replacement of rolling stock. [63574]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): Train operating companies will have to replace or modify certain trains to meet their commitments to the franchising director and any requirements of the Health and Safety Executive. It is for the train operators to make the necessary arrangements with rolling stock companies.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister go a little further and give some comfort to my constituents who, like me, use Connex South Central services daily and experience the unsatisfactory nature of many of the slam-door mark 1 trains which are still being used by that train operating company? Given that the franchise will not be extended, and given that the company says that there is no way in which it can replace those trains, is there any chance of those trains being replaced during the lifetime of this Government?

Ms Jackson: The Health and Safety Executive has recommended to Ministers that all mark 1 rolling stock on the network should be modified by 2003 and replaced by 2007. Ministers are considering the recommendations, and an announcement will be made shortly. The hon. Gentleman referred to difficulties being experienced by certain train operating companies. Those companies showed no reluctance to bid competitively for the relevant franchises, and it is for them to meet their commitments and any requirements placed on them by the Health and Safety Executive.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the planned rail summit in February will include representations from the roscos, so that constituents such as mine can look forward to an enhanced performance and an improved quality of rolling stock in the short term, rather than the long term?

Ms Jackson: I can confirm that the rolling stock companies will be present at the rail summit on 25 February. My hon. Friend touches on yet another example of the lamentable failure of the previous Administration who, during rail privatisation, ensured that the rolling stock was sold off at a fraction of its actual worth, and ensured also that the rolling stock companies were totally outside the regulatory system. That was another example of their failure to exercise competent stewardship of the national infrastructure.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Along with that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), my constituency has Connex South Central services. We have rolling stock which dates from before the Beatles were ever heard of—when Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister—which must be replaced urgently. What steps will the Minister take to correct the sell-off of the roscos—a disgrace in terms of taxpayers' money—and bring them within the regulatory system?

Ms Jackson: We have made it abundantly clear that we expect the rolling stock companies to exercise a mature approach. There is a competitive market, and we have seen new entrants into it. Since franchising, 1,400 new vehicles have been ordered; a replacement of well over 10 per cent. of the original fleet. There are commitments to order a further 800 vehicles at a cost of about £1 billion, and some 4,000 additional vehicles have been or are being refurbished. We have made it clear to rolling stock companies that if there is any hint of anti-competitive behaviour on their part, we will seriously address the possibility of legislation.

Single Regeneration Budget

11. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): How the single regeneration budget fifth programme will be targeted on the areas of greatest need. [63575]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Alan Meale): Under round 5 of the single regeneration budget, about 80 per cent. of new SRB resources will support comprehensive regeneration schemes in the most deprived areas, based on the 1998 index of local deprivation. About 20 per cent. of the resources will tackle pockets of need elsewhere, including rural areas, coalfield areas and coastal towns.

Mr. Marsden: In welcoming my hon. Friend's answer, may I draw his attention to two matters? First, there is a need for the survey to be extremely specialised, given that, in seaside and coastal towns in particular, there are often pockets of deprivation in the centre of towns. Secondly, during that review, will he look especially favourably and sympathetically on those areas of public infrastructure in seaside and coastal towns that are not currently eligible for heritage or other forms of lottery grant?

Mr. Meale: First, I pay tribute to the amount of work that my hon. Friend has done since becoming a Member of Parliament at the last general election. The Government are well aware of the extent of the social deprivation occurring in many seaside and coastal towns. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has shown his awareness of it in his many speeches on regeneration and in the reshaped single regeneration budget, which was announced on 22 July 1998. We shall pay particular regard to the problem and focus on it in any future SRB bids and planning.

Capping Criteria

12. **Mr. Andrew Lansley** (South Cambridgeshire): If he will make a statement on the impact which his decision not to announce capping criteria will have on *(a)* transparency and *(b)* accountability. [63576]

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): The accountability and transparency of local authority decision making will be improved. Local authorities will no longer be able simply

to take their capping limits as their budgets, and will instead have to consider carefully their needs and the funding they will receive when drawing up their spending plans.

Mr. Lansley: Does the Minister not understand that the absence of pre-signalling of capping criteria means that, to local authorities, the capping system this year, far from being transparent, is utterly opaque? Does she understand that it would be an unhappy situation if local authorities were to be capped with a small margin between their budget requirement and the capping limit? Will she give local authorities and the House two pledges: first, that an allowance will be made for very small differences between any capping criteria, so as not to require rebilling for small sums of money; and, secondly, that she will take particular account of the special circumstances of authorities that have a budget requirement that is close to their standard spending assessment?

Ms Armstrong: I am not able to tell the House today what the capping criteria will be. We are currently consulting on that matter; the consultation finishes tomorrow and we shall bring our proposals to the House. I do not accept that the system has been made more opaque. The fact is that the previous Administration introduced a system that meant that central Government determined everything. That gives local authorities little accountability to local people and little opportunity or responsibility to work with local people to achieve a budget that gets the best for local people at a price they are prepared to pay. I believe that the new system will lead to increased accountability and to greater clarity for local people.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I believe that transparency is something on which the Labour Government were elected. I asked a similar question about the criteria used for capping, but the answer I received was "No." That is not helpful to local government, especially the council in Chorley which asked me to ask the question. Will the Minister reconsider the answer she gave and be more open and more transparent?

Ms Armstrong: We are fulfilling a manifesto commitment, and I understand that my hon. Friend was also elected on that manifesto. As long as central Government set the limits, although the system will be transparent at one level, at another it will remove all responsibility from local authorities. Local authorities should be more independent and more responsible to local taxpayers. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has made it clear that local authorities are charged with being responsible. If they are responsible, capping will not arise.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): May I remind the Minister that the Labour manifesto promised to end universal capping; that the Oxfordshire Labour party manifesto for the 1997 county council elections said, "Vote Labour and end capping and the cuts to local services"; but that, on taking office, the Labour Government capped Oxfordshire's budget, jointly proposed by the Labour group? Does she accept that, by not publishing in advance the capping criteria, not only is there still universal capping, but there is now random universal capping? The people of Oxfordshire will not forgive the Government for the cuts in social services and education that flow from that outright negation of local democracy.

Ms Armstrong: I met Oxfordshire county council this morning. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was not part of that delegation, but I take his point as part of his representations and I am not criticising him. The manifesto commitment was to remove crude and universal capping. In the manifesto, we made it absolutely clear that we would retain reserve powers. There is a national interest and we are seeking to achieve a balance between the local and national interests.

Ashworth Special Hospital

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the report of the public inquiry into the Ashworth special hospital conducted by his honour Peter Fallon QC. That inquiry was established by my predecessor in February 1997 to investigate allegations by Mr. Steven Daggett, a former patient of Ashworth special hospital, that there was misuse of drugs, financial irregularities, possible child molesting and the circulation of pornographic material in the personality disorder unit at the hospital.

I also pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), who brought this matter to the attention of the Government. She subsequently received threatening telephone calls, which she believes came from people whose trade in pornographic videos was interrupted by her intervention.

In this short statement, it is difficult to do justice to the inquiry report, which is 473 pages long. The executive summary alone covers 44 pages. So, I will highlight the major points in the report. The inquiry sat for a total of 66 days, taking evidence from a wide range of witnesses involved in Ashworth hospital, both in the past and at present.

The report presents a shameful picture. The general allegations made by Mr. Daggett were largely true. There were financial irregularities, drug abuse, the circulation of pornography and a poor quality of patient care.

Mr. Daggett's main allegations referred to Lawrence ward in the personality disorder unit. A ward within a personality disorder unit, set inside a special hospital, had been repeatedly visited by a seven-year-old girl, who was allowed unsupervised contact with patients guilty of sex offences against children. Her father brought her into the unit and, without let or hindrance, gave her unsupervised access to one patient who had a history of molesting young girls, including indecent assault and attempted rape. She also visited another patient who was locked up in Ashworth because he had kidnapped, tortured, sexually assaulted, mutilated and eventually murdered a 13-year-old boy. I am glad to say that the inquiry report concludes that there was no proof that the girl was abused, but that she was being "groomed" for later abuse.

The inquiry asked how a young girl could have been allowed to visit such men. It was told that the Lawrence ward was special and that there were not many incidents. All the patients were allowed to roam round much of the hospital unaccompanied. For a time, routine searching did not take place. The inquiry was told that the ward espoused the philosophy of a "democratic community". I should emphasise that the inhabitants of that so-called democratic community had between them committed innumerable murders, manslaughters, indecent assaults, indecent assaults on children, assaults or woundings with intent and a host of other offences.

The inquiry concludes that a small group of patients, led by the child murderer, was intimidating patients and staff and had gained a grip on the ward. It also concludes that there was a drugs problem on Lawrence ward, that it was endemic throughout the hospital, but that there was no direct evidence that nursing staff were involved.

The financial irregularities arose from a shop on Lawrence ward, from the sale of pornographic materials including videos and from people conducting credit card businesses. Judging by the report, Lawrence ward appears to be a veritable outpost of the enterprise culture. The father who brought his daughter into Ashworth hospital also supplied pornographic videos, which he was allowed to deliver by car to the ward without either him or the car being properly searched.

There was a shop on Lawrence ward that was supposed to sell confectionery and soft drinks. Its turnover started at £50 a month and soared to £14,000 between January and October 1996. The child murderer also ran an unofficial shop from his side ward.

Unknown to senior managers, several patients—including Mr. Daggett, the person who complained—had been allowed credit cards. Eventually, when managers decided to end this arrangement, patients were forced to cut up their cards, but they retained the numbers so that they could renew them or continue to use them in telephone transactions. Security was so slack that Mr. Daggett managed, while in the hospital, to change his name by deed poll, acquire a new passport and driving licence and use a credit card to take out a large sum of money, prior to absconding.

The inquiry found that security was so lax that neither patients and staff, nor visitors were properly searched. It confirms Mr. Daggett's claim that, on Lawrence ward, the patients' rooms were not properly searched. That was illustrated when a full-scale search in January 1997 revealed a stock of children's underwear in the room of the man who had molested girls, and male pornography in the room of the child murderer. Both patients had video cassette recorders, used for copying videos. A previous search of the boot room on the ward had revealed 41 pornographic videos.

The inquiry set out to find how that deplorable situation had come about and how it had been allowed to persist. What it found out is a shameful story of confusion, indecision, mismanagement and incompetence. Some of the professionals and managers failed to show a glimmer of common sense, let alone to live up to the standards of their professions. The whole thing was a mess from top to bottom.

In the past, Ashworth had operated a harsh and repressive regime. Following scandals in the early 1990s, the Blom-Cooper inquiry in 1992 recommended a more liberal approach. The Fallon inquiry concludes that those recommendations, which were mainly directed at the rest of the hospital, were implemented without proper consideration of their differing impact on different patient groups. As a result, the patients with personality disorders enjoyed most personal freedom and reduced security. The report says that it was quite predictable that those failures could be abused by some of the patients.

What is clear is that, because of the failure of top management to lay down and enforce clear rules for both patients and staff, security became less and less important. As a result, more and more problems arose but nobody attended to them. As the report says,

"all too often the core principles of security were absent."

Nobody was seen to be in charge of the personality disorder unit. That was because nobody—with the possible exception of the patients—was really in charge. The senior management staff were out of touch, and psychiatrists seem to have been incapable of carrying out their proper professional functions. Management decisions, if known, were frequently ignored by both staff

and patients. The internal monitoring system did not work. The members of the board do not seem to have known what was going on. The external monitoring system did not work. Events within Ashworth were not reported to senior officials of the national health service or the Department of Health. Reports into serious incidents were suppressed.

The Fallon report concludes that the whole system was at fault. I am sure that that is right, but the report goes on to criticise individuals and I am sure that that is right too, because too many people at Ashworth failed to do properly the jobs that they were paid to do. The report criticises a number of people by name. Ashworth hospital authority has already taken disciplinary action against some people, and some others have left Ashworth.

In the case of any of those criticised in the report who are still employed by the NHS, whether at Ashworth or elsewhere, I expect their employers to initiate appropriate disciplinary proceedings in the light of the report. In at least one case, the report will be drawn to the attention of the General Medical Council and other professional regulatory bodies. The United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting has already commenced disciplinary action in one case.

The report recommends that Mr. Paul Lever, chairman of Ashworth hospital authority, should step down. He has done so. Anne Marie Nelson, former chairman of the Special Hospitals Service Authority and present chairman of the High Security Psychiatric Services Commissioning Board has also resigned, in accordance with the principles of public accountability.

The running of Ashworth and the terrible incidents there were the subject in the 1990s of a succession of inquiries and reports. In 1990, one patient was murdered on Owen ward and another was murdered on Forster ward. In 1992, the director of security carried out security audits at Ashworth, Broadmoor and Rampton. Her recommendations for greater security at Ashworth were ignored. At about the same time, a task force that was implementing the Blom-Cooper report described Ashworth as "over custodial". The Fallon report describes the task force's policy as a recipe for disaster.

In 1993, an inquiry into the women's services at Ashworth, which are not part of the personality disorder unit, produced a damning report. In 1995, there was an internal investigation into a hostage-taking on Owen ward. The report was 59 pages long with appendices covering 385 pages. Again, it was a damning indictment of what went on, but staff were shown only a nine-page summary, and so was the official responsible for implementing its recommendations.

Neither the Owen ward report nor the Swan report was made available to the health advisory service before publication of its review of progress following the Blom-Cooper report in 1995. Also in 1995 and again in 1996, patients attacked members of staff with razors. Later that year, the discovery in mail addressed to a patient of a machine for embossing share certificates led to an inquiry which revealed security breaches, scams and money-making ventures in the personality disorder unit.

Reports were prepared on all the incidents, but no machinery was put in place to see that changes and improvements were made. Nor was anyone ever given the task. I am determined that the Fallon report will not suffer the same fate. The report makes 58 detailed recommendations. Some cover the operational procedures at Ashworth. I am giving the hospital authority four months to develop an action plan to implement the necessary changes within the hospital. I am appointing Ian Pirnie to chair the authority during that process. Mr. Pirnie presently chairs the Morecambe Bay health authority. I hope and expect that he will bring to this task the leadership and management skills that he demonstrated as an admiral in the Royal Navy.

Other recommendations cover the general role and organisation of the special hospitals and their relationship with the rest of the national health service. Those will be the personal responsibility of Sir Alan Langlands, the chief executive of the NHS. I have given the task of ensuring progress on the more general recommendations which apply across government to Chris Kelly, the permanent secretary at the Department of Health. All three will report directly to me and all three will be expected to deliver.

The inquiry team gave final clearance to its report on Wednesday of last week. The printed edition arrived this morning; it is being published this afternoon. A detailed response to all its recommendations will be published as soon as possible. In the meantime, I can say that the Government broadly accept most of the recommendations and I can give an immediate response to some of those that will be of most concern.

The report recommends that security should be given a higher priority—that searches of patients and staff should be introduced, that no visitors should be allowed into Ashworth without being searched and that there should be regular searches of patients' rooms. The Government accept those recommendations. We give top priority to the safety of the public. We have already taken action. All aspects of security have already been tightened up. New rules have been introduced. Management is making sure that they are implemented for people entering and leaving the Ashworth site, within the site and on the wards.

Further investment in extra security staff is being made. An extra £1.5 million is being made available for all three special hospitals this year and a further £4.5 million is being made available for increased physical security measures at Ashworth. That will allow fully effective searches to be made of all visitors, staff, patients, goods and vehicles, including, where appropriate, the use of X-rays, metal detectors and sniffer dogs.

I have arranged for an independent review of all aspects of security, including the use of the post and telephones at all three special hospitals, which will report direct to Sir Alan Langlands. The social services inspectorate will conduct inquiries into the social work aspects of Ashworth, and subsequently the other two hospitals, and report directly to me.

On visits by children, we have already changed the rules on child visitors and gone beyond the recommendations in the report. In September last year, we put a stop to child visits to ward areas and visits by children who are not close relatives of the patients. No visits are allowed unless they are judged to be in the best interests of the child. All visits by children must be off the wards and must be supervised. Any visits by a child must be by prior arrangement. The rules apply at all three hospitals, and I wish to make it clear that those who breach any of those rules can expect to be summarily dismissed from their job.

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

The report recommends a review of the whole system of accountability within the national health service and between the national health service, officials of the Department of Health and Ministers, particularly in relation to the special hospitals and more generally. I share some of the inquiry's concerns about the system that I have inherited from my predecessors. I have made clear to the House who is to have personal responsibility for dealing with the various aspects of the report and that, for the present, they will all report directly to me.

The health Bill, which we will be introducing shortly, will put in place stronger and clearer accountability arrangements for the whole of the national health service and will end the internal market that has clearly inhibited more active management by the national health service executive and regional offices. As recommended in the Fallon report, the commission for health improvement will cover the special hospitals.

In addition, the board of every hospital—including each special hospital—will have for the first time a statutory duty concerning the standards of treatment and care it provides, there will be clearer powers for the Secretary of State to issue directions, and new arrangements for commissioning specialised services. I am giving further consideration to the question of overall accountability in the light of the report's recommendations.

The inquiry was set up to consider the personality disorder unit, not the future of the whole hospital, and of its high-security psychiatric services. However, the inquiry team has recommended the closure of Ashworth hospital. The Government do not accept that recommendation.

In the policy document "Modernising Mental Health Services", on which I reported to the House on 8 December last year, we made it clear that we want to see a closer integration of the high-security services with the other secure services, and the reconstitution of the special hospitals as NHS trusts. For the foreseeable future, the three special hospitals must continue to be the main providers of high-security services. There is no practical alternative in the short term. To announce that the three special hospitals had no long-term future, but that they could not be replaced for a good many years would run the risk of making them even more difficult to manage than they are now.

In any case, I do not believe that the problem at Ashworth is one of bricks and mortar. The problem is management, and that is what we are determined to tackle. The personality disorder unit at Ashworth is not some decrepit Victorian dump: it was purpose-built. Work started on it in 1976 and was completed in 1984. Replacing it with smaller high-security units spread around the country would not guarantee better security, higher-quality treatment and care or more effective management. That would still have to be planned, organised and worked at.

The members of the inquiry team gave a great deal of thought to how best the legal, medical and penal systems should deal with people suffering from severe personality disorder, and they make a number of very useful recommendations for far-reaching changes. I welcome those ideas very much, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I will consider them very carefully as we develop new and more effective ways of dealing with people suffering from severe personality disorder, whether they are currently in prison, hospital or in the outside world. Public security must be our main priority. The Government will also make sure that the recommendations in the Fallon report are made available to the teams reviewing the Mental Health Act 1983 and mental health services.

As a result, that may lead to changes in the role of the Ashworth personality disorder unit, the scale of its operations and how they are organised. It could mean breaking up the hospital into smaller physically segregated units, but we do not contemplate its closure. However, we agree with the inquiry team that a new form of reviewable detention is needed for those people with a severe personality disorder who are considered to pose a grave risk to the public. We therefore announced in December in our strategy document "Modernising Mental Health Services" that we would make proposals that ensure that the safety of the public is the prime concern and that a new regime is established for that difficult group of people.

Since the Fallon inquiry got under way there have been many changes at Ashworth. The process of change has not been without its problems, but progress is being made. The quality of the medical staff has improved substantially as a result of new appointments, management has improved and security has been tightened, but there is still a long way to go.

I should add that despite the catalogue of disasters accurately outlined in the Fallon report, many of the staff at Ashworth have been trying hard to do a good job. They work in very difficult circumstances. The patients in the personality disorder unit are often highly intelligent and manipulative as well as dangerous. They have to be looked after and checked on 24 hours of every day so that the rest of us can be secure. We owe it to the staff to make a fresh start at Ashworth and to encourage the good staff and management, partly by getting rid of the bad ones. The new arrangements and the new people should deliver a better performance all round.

A natural question that will arise in the minds of most decent people is, "How is the little girl getting on?" I have checked. She seems to be doing pretty well. She is living a settled life and under a court order, her father has no contact with her. She was being exploited by the adult world. I am determined to ensure that from now on the adult world looks after her instead. I hope that all will respect her privacy. At my instigation, a court order is being sought to prohibit disclosure of her name, address or school or any other information that might identify her. I hope that that will be respected.

Finally, I thank his honour Peter Fallon, the other members of the inquiry team and their secretariat for the thorough way in which they have gone about their business and the report that they have produced. They have done their job. It is now up to us to do ours.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I thank the Secretary of State for that important statement and for making available to me a little earlier a copy of the substantial report. I express the Opposition's support for his action this morning in seeking to protect the identity of the little girl involved through an application to the court for an appropriate order.

As the Secretary of State has said, the management problems at Ashworth hospital go back a long way. They are in many respects linked to a wider question about the appropriate approach to dealing with the most dangerous mentally ill offenders. The provision of a regime that is at once therapeutic and secure, thus achieving the twin imperatives of treatment for the patient and ensuring, as a paramount concern, the safety of the public, poses enormous challenges. Many changes in practice have been introduced since the early 1990s and major steps have been taken towards integrating the special hospitals into the mainstream structure of the NHS. The Opposition support the Government in seeking to continue that process. There has been a good deal of constructive collaboration in the past, and the Opposition hope that that approach will continue.

Even with the benefit of 20:20 hindsight, I believe that my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) and, before him, my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) acted promptly and appropriately when these matters came to light.

The Fallon inquiry was established by the previous Government to investigate the operation of the personality disorder unit within the hospital and to make recommendations to ensure that there could be no recurrence of such activities as those revealed by the evidence of Steven Daggett in early 1997.

The Secretary of State has already made it clear that what he has said today is but an initial response to a massive and detailed report. The House and the Secretary of State will appreciate that we have had even less time than he has to digest the details of the report, but I welcome his initial response that he will accept the bulk of its recommendations.

The Secretary of State has said that he will publish a detailed response in due course. Will he give an undertaking that he will make a statement when that response is published and the hospital management's detailed proposals are available? Will he otherwise make arrangements to ensure further discussion of matters once we have all had the chance to consider and digest the report?

The report's central recommendation to close the hospital completely has been rejected by the Secretary of State. In doing so, he is taking on a heavy burden of responsibility. It is his duty to ensure the safety of the public and of patients in the hospital. In rejecting the report's recommendation to close the personality disorder unit at Ashworth, he must be absolutely confident that the action that he has taken and is proposing to take will safeguard both the public and patients.

The House, too, will want to be reassured that the Secretary of State's action will be effective in addressing the long-running and intolerable problems at Ashworth. Will he therefore undertake to review the situation at Ashworth in 18 months, and make a further statement at that time on the effectiveness of the measures which are to be implemented in lieu of the recommended closure of Ashworth hospital?

What measures will the Secretary of State take to oversee the implementation of the recommendations that the Government have accepted, bearing in mind the report's criticism of the implementation task force, which was set up to oversee implementation of the Blom-Cooper report recommendations? Will he assure the House that outsiders will be involved in that oversight process?

Does the Secretary of State envisage that continuing down the route of regionalisation and providing regional high-security units will eventually lead to the closure of the three special hospitals? Will he confirm that, in the meantime, no offender convicted of a serious offence will be transferred from high-security to medium-secure facilities? Will he further confirm that there will be no reduction in the number of high-security beds that deal with the throughput from the courts?

I noted that the Secretary of State expressed the hope that the relevant employers will take appropriate action in respect of any persons named in the report who are still employed in the national health service. Will he assure the House that he will follow up that expression of hope with action to ensure that, if such people are still employed in the NHS, they will be immediately suspended from their duties while the relevant employers investigate matters more fully?

The Secretary of State acknowledged the failure of management at Ashworth over many years. Given that there have been two changes of chief executive since this Government came to power, does he have full confidence in the hospital's current management and its ability to implement the report's recommendations?

Mr. Dobson: First, may I report to the House—I think that all hon. Members will be pleased to hear this—that I have just received a note saying that the High Court has granted the order to protect the confidentiality of the child.

We shall certainly be producing a detailed response. Whether that will be given on the Floor of the House and whether there will be an opportunity for debate is a matter not for me but for my right hon. Friends the Leader of the House and the Chief Whip. We shall have to leave it in their hands.

I have never tried to get out of responsibility for any decision that I have taken. Security of the public and of people in the hospital must be the paramount consideration. Some advocates of breaking large hospitals into many smaller units seem to think, in a Pollyanna way, that everything will therefore be all right. There is no guarantee that a collection of small units would be more secure than one large and highly secure unit. I want to ensure that these people are securely locked up and that security is guaranteed in the hospital. I think that I am taking the option that is likely to prove the most secure.

With regard to implementation, I have spelt out who will have responsibility, at least in the short run, for the immediate implementation of the major recommendations. They will report to me and I will ultimately report to the House.

On the eventual closure of Ashworth or the other hospitals, I cannot speculate too far ahead, but I do not envisage any of the three being wholly closed.

With reference to high-security beds, there are people who are moved from high-security units to medium-secure units because the psychiatrists and others responsible believe that they will be safe there. Some of those people are allowed out because the psychiatrists believe that they have changed as a result of treatment, have improved and will be safe. The number of beds therefore varies, and we should not get into a great party political spat about that.

[Mr. Dobson]

I am fairly confident that it will be possible to mount successful disciplinary proceedings against people employed by the Ashworth authority for something that they did wrong or failed to do at Ashworth. The situation is more complicated if they have moved to other jobs in the national health service. As I said earlier, I share some of the concerns of the Fallon inquiry about accountability in the NHS. I cannot instruct a health authority or a trust to dismiss anyone under the present powers available to me or the powers that previous Ministers used to have.

I have confidence in the arrangements that I am making and the changes that we are making at Ashworth. As I said in my initial statement, I do not suggest that it will be plain sailing. There have been difficulties. One chief executive at Ashworth lost the confidence of the doctors and had to be removed. She has been replaced, and I hope that the replacement will do a good job. He certainly seems to be doing a good job, and it is my job to try to help him and the others to do their jobs.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I echo my right hon. Friend's tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) for her role in exposing this sad affair. I am sorry that she cannot be present today, but I am sure that she would welcome many of the steps taken by my right hon. Friend, particularly those relating to the little girl.

Is it not a fact that the special hospital system has been a shambles for years and is one of the great unresolved policy issues of the previous Administration? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the internal review commissioned by the previous Government, chaired by Dr. John Reed, recommended the closure of Ashworth and the other two special hospitals, and strongly recommended moving in the direction of regional secure units at a localised level?

Does my right hon. Friend accept that the failure of the previous Government to act along those lines has led to serious difficulties in the prison system? Prisons such as Wakefield in my constituency are accommodating vast numbers of seriously mentally ill people who ought to be receiving psychiatric care, rather than prison care. Does he agree that in the longer term, the only way to avoid problems such as those at Ashworth is to move in the direction set out by John Reed?

Mr. Dobson: I have great respect for the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), as he well knows, but I am not sure that I agree with him in this matter. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are giving consideration to various categories of people suffering from personality disorder: the people in the hospitals who, in theory, are treatable but many of whom are not actually treatable; the people in the prisons who are suffering from personality disorder, are not getting the attention that they deserve and are a real nuisance to the prison system; and the people outside with personality disorder, who are dangerous but have not committed an offence, who the psychiatrists believe cannot be treated and who therefore have no place either in a prison or a hospital.

We are considering all sorts of alternatives for dealing with that, including a reviewable detention for all three categories and the possibility of establishing a separate service to deal specifically with that minority. That may be the best way forward.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): First, I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to Judge Fallon and his team who, in the short time available, appear to have done an extremely thorough and comprehensive piece of work. I also pay tribute to the Secretary of State and his predecessor for the speed with which they set up the inquiry and published its conclusions.

It appears from the report that the management of Ashworth was nothing short of outrageous. To adopt a phrase from elsewhere, it appears to be truly a case of the most disordered patients being in charge of the hospital. That being so, an instinctive gut reaction would be that the place must close, but the Liberal Democrats are prepared to share the Secretary of State's view that to announce its closure would create as many problems as would keeping it open. However, it should be seen to be a hospital on licence rather than on probation or under sentence, because unless it gets its act together, it would clearly be inappropriate for it to have an extended life.

With proper management, accountability and scrutiny, the hospital should be able to do the job, but will the Secretary of State accept the following suggestions? First, there should be a move within the hospital to management within smaller units. In particular, thought should be given to separating those who are convicted from those who are not convicted.

Secondly, will the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary, when considering their responses—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and I will as we consider the matter in more detail—bear in mind the great benefit of following the report's recommendation to bring the medical staff in the Prison Service under the Department of Health, so that psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses can be moved between prisons and special hospitals? There would then not be the culture of closed wards, which we now have in special hospitals, where such people basically stay for life. Instead they would enjoy career development and progress, which might also allow us to recruit the psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses now in short supply.

Lastly, given that this is exactly the sort of subject where public interest demands that we get security and the method of coping with severely disabled people right, I offer the services of Liberal Democrats, with, I hope, those of Conservative Members, in reaching an all-party agreement on the way forward, which I hope will result in a secure and safe system, with a tough and effective inspectorate, so that such a scandalous outrage never happens again.

Mr. Dobson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the report and statement, and for his acceptance of our view that we cannot close Ashworth.

One of the problems with a probationary period, or the sword of Damocles hanging over Ashworth, is that, if Ashworth is to work, those working there will have to show a real commitment to the hospital, and they are only likely to show such commitment if they feel that the Government share that commitment. What is good for them is good for us.

We have already contemplated breaking the hospital up into smaller units. We must clearly improve security within the hospital. The hospital has many vulnerable patients suffering from mental illness, and it is clear that a militant force of people from the personality disorder unit dominates everything, including the bodies which are supposed to represent all the patients and many of the staff. We want to stop that domination by breaking the hospital up into smaller, more easily controlled units.

However, if we are to have a proper regime which will look after the mental health interests of all the patients, security is crucial. It is impossible to deliver a decent therapeutic service without security, including security for the staff, some of whom have been stabbed while others have been held to ransom.

We are contemplating what to do about the prison health service, which always poses problems. I certainly welcome any commitment from the Liberal party, or anyone else, to ensure that this time we get it right, because in the past we got it wrong every time.

Audrey Wise (Preston): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the structure of what he described as the semi-autonomous trusts that he inherited makes his job more difficult, and that it is ironic that the Opposition should call for firm action from him when, as he has made clear, not all the levers are in his hands? However, does he agree that, because of Ashworth's troubled history, special attention should have been paid to it by structures within the national health service, such as the regional offices? Will he assure me that he will examine the role—or lack of it—of the regional offices to make quite sure that they, too, had their priorities right?

Although I agree completely that the staff at lower levels and the local management should be firmly held to account, dereliction of duty, neglect, or failure to have the right priorities at a higher level should not go unrecognised and unremarked.

Mr. Dobson: I sympathise with my hon. and well informed Friend's view. We live in a country where—as in this case—it is characteristic that, as far as I am aware, the first person to be sacked outright was an unqualified nurse, whereas other people, earning large sums, have been suspended on full pay or have gone to other well-paid jobs. I am determined to trace the responsibility, wherever it lies. In fairness to those who work in the regional offices of the national health service, until we came to power, they were being told to keep their noses out of virtually everything and merely to provide a service if it was asked for.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): By whom?

Mr. Dobson: By the previous Government and by the very competitive internal market which they had established. We are moving towards giving a much bigger and more positive role to the regional offices. We believe that to be necessary, not only in this sphere, but in matters such as the maintenance of proper surveillance and monitoring of the cervical and breast cancer screening system, where there was none until we gave that role to the regional offices.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his consideration in allowing me to see a copy of the report earlier this afternoon. Undoubtedly, it sets out a most odious and appalling set of circumstances. I recall a similar sense of shock when I read the Blom-Cooper report about six years ago. I regret that Mr. Fallon accuses me of being over-zealous, if anything, in implementing the Blom-Cooper recommendations, but the right hon. Gentleman, in reading the report before us, will share my sense that such a state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue. I believe that there were seven suspensions then; he has identified a number of people who the report suggests should also be held responsible.

Anne Marie Nelson was totally dedicated, absolutely committed and determined to get the right balance between security and treatment. It did not work, and she has rightly stepped down, but I wish to place that point on record. When the hospital staff are mentioned—the right hon. Gentleman has referred to them—it is hard to distinguish between those who were at the heart of deplorable and unacceptable practices and those who were bravely and courageously trying to improve standards of care, with precious little support from their colleagues or superiors. A judgment has therefore to be made.

I am concerned about the distinction between the comments in the Fallon report—essentially endorsed, I think, by the Secretary of State—and the comments of the Home Secretary in the aftermath of the Michael Stone case. The Fallon report suggests, if anything, a shift towards pressure on the Prison Service to take more responsibility, or keep more offenders, whereas the Home Secretary appeared to be critical of the health service for not doing more for these troublesome, intractable and, frankly, costly patients, or offenders—call them what you wish.

I would appreciate some guidance from the Secretary of State. In which direction does he see the policy moving? How does he see the tension between security and care, and the distinction between patients and prisoners?

Mr. Dobson: In a sense, I do not think that there is a tension between security and care, because without security there will be no care. That has been one of the problems at Ashworth. I think that the relaxations introduced as a result of the Blom-Cooper report have been harmful. They may have produced benefits for some, but I do not believe that they produced benefits for many.

As for hospital staff and the whole system of responsibility, even after a reading of the Fallon report it is difficult to know who was responsible for any of these matters in the past. It is not clear which Ministers, which senior staff in the health service and which officials at the Department of Health were responsible, how those in the regional office, those in the commissioning body and those "on the ground" at Ashworth were involved, who was responsible for security, who was responsible for therapy or who was responsible for running the wards. The whole thing was a systematic shambles from top to bottom, and it must be sorted out.

I do not think that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was criticising the national health service when he said what he did after the Michael Stone case. He was, in fact, mounting a legitimate criticism of the attitude of some parts of the psychiatric profession. If someone has a personality disorder and commits a crime, that person will, we hope, be caught, prosecuted and imprisoned; but

[Mr. Dobson]

there is another category of people who are dangerous, and who psychiatrists feel can be treated in hospital. Under the law, such people are entitled to go into hospital and be treated.

There is another category, of people with severe personality disorders who have not committed an offence, and who would clearly not benefit from treatment. At present, the system provides nowhere for those people to go. The problem created by the psychiatric profession—or some members of it—is the reduction of the proportion of people whom the psychiatrists considered capable of being treated in hospital. That extended the number who were not being dealt with by the system. I think that my right hon. Friend's criticism was perfectly legitimate, which is why we are trying to deal with the problem.

Generally speaking, it seems that the further down the hierarchy hospital staff were, the more committed they were to the hospital, to patients, to security and to doing a good job; conversely, the further up the hierarchy they were, the less committed they were.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I suspect that those who have been described today as being dedicated to the work of caring for the most difficult members of the community will be extremely sad, especially those who work at Ashford. They will feel that they have been tarred with the same brush as others, and will say, "If anyone mentions Ashworth, I shall be ashamed to say that I worked there." What building work can we do to reinvigorate those people—they are committed to the most difficult people in our society, to healing them, to getting to grips with their recovery and to getting them into communities—to try to ensure that they can be proud of the work that they do, even though they have been severely let down by others?

Mr. Dobson: Given my hon. Friend's professional knowledge, I would respond to her by saying that I am concerned to show a firm commitment by the Government to Ashworth hospital, so that staff there feel that it will be reasonable for them to retain their commitment to the hospital, the patients and what the hospital is trying to do. Unless we have that commitment and put better people on the board and in management, the staff will become more and more disillusioned; but I have gone out of my way in the statement and in response to questions to make it clear that many people there do a difficult job on our behalf and get little credit for it. I want to ensure that they can do their jobs properly and are properly rewarded for that in every sense of the word.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The report is a frightening account of professional and managerial failure. In his statement, the Secretary of State said that he was referring the report's contents to various professional bodies in the health care sector. May I first seek an undertaking that he will make public the replies that he receives from those bodies, as their commentary on the sorry tale of Ashworth would be interesting?

Secondly, the Secretary of State mentioned the other special hospitals: Rampton and Broadmoor. May I seek his assurance that the Government's response to the report will include a section to say that the Secretary of State has checked against current procedures at Broadmoor and Rampton to ensure that none of the failures that are outlined by the report are in any way possible or incorporated into managerial or professional structures at those two other hospitals?

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Gentleman has raised two points. The first is about the responses of the professional bodies. Unless I am advised by my officials that I am breaking the law, I am prepared to publish them; in fact, whatever their advice, I will publish them. In relation to his second point, we need to take great care in dealing with all these matters. If it would help the right hon. Gentleman, I will think about the point that he has made and write to him in due course.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am sure that, like most hon. Members, I have listened to the Secretary of State's statement with an increasing sense of horror and disbelief at the catalogue of events at Ashworth, but I am aware that Dr. Peter Clarke, the acting chief executive, who was seconded from Salford's mental health services, is trying tremendously hard with his management team to make improvements, although he personally acknowledges that there is a long way to go.

Will the Secretary of State reassure us and confirm that we will move as swiftly as we can to implement the ideas that are set out in our White Paper "Modernising Mental Health Services", to ensure that special hospitals can become full national health service trusts and part of the NHS family? In that way, we can put the values of the health service—openness, accountability, transparency, the caring ethos of the NHS—into those institutions. They need to be opened up and made fully a part of the NHS family. I would welcome his reassurance that we will move in that direction.

Mr. Dobson: I can confirm that it is our intention to change the law in the health Bill that we will introduce to do just what my hon. Friend says. For several reasons, I am concerned about the way in which senior executive appointments are made in the NHS. If we ask someone, in effect as a favour, to take over the management of a very difficult place such as Ashworth, I would like to be in a position to tell them at the start, "If you do a good job for two or three years, we will be able to guarantee that you will move on to some other job, possibly a better paid job, as a reward for doing a good job in the one that we are asking you to do now." Under the present arrangements I cannot do that. There is something lacking in the system because we need to reward people who do a really good job, whether they are nurses on the wards or chief executives of hospitals.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): May I ask the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary to recognise that it will not do simply to castigate psychiatrists for not classifying as mentally ill and treatable highly dangerous people who are not mentally ill and do not appear to be treatable? Since the report makes it clear that there is such a category of people, and since there are some such people now in custody who might be released because they are not considered to be treatable, there is some urgency about the Secretary of State's discussions with the

Home Secretary and a need to develop something along the lines of the reviewable sentence, which is recommended in the report.

Mr. Dobson: I recognise that some people with personality disorders cannot be treated. The problem is that the psychiatrists have changed the boundaries, and there is such a thing as psychiatric fashion just as there is fashion about removing people's tonsils. One of the problems that has arisen is that, recently, the psychiatrists have decided that far fewer people can be treated and it just so happens that that means they do not have to deal with them.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I wholeheartedly agree with the Secretary of State that the problems at Ashworth are problems not of bricks and mortar but of management. Anyone who has had any contact with that hospital over the years knows that only too well. May I suggest to my right hon. Friend and other Back-Bench Members who have not yet had an opportunity to read the full report that two steps need to be taken? First, the concept of 24-hour care, which was introduced after the Blom-Cooper report, worked disastrously in the personality disorder unit because, in practice, it meant patients wandering around in the middle of the night.

Steps must be taken to ensure that patients, particularly those with personality disorders, co-operate with their agreed care plans and face sanctions if they do not. Secondly, while there are many good staff at Ashworth hospital, an inward-looking culture has developed in that institution over the years, and we must move away from that. Although we can look at the future of the prison health service with the NHS, there are other steps that need to be taken immediately to ensure that Ashworth forges links with other parts of the NHS such as mental health trusts and regional secure units. That would help to provide continuity of care and better career paths for staff, which in turn would help us to attract good staff to work in Ashworth. I would appreciate my right hon. Friend's comments on those two points.

Mr. Dobson: I know that my hon. Friend has had both professional and local involvement with people in Ashworth and she has made a valid point. For hon. Members who do not know, generally speaking, in the past if one lived in Ashworth hospital, one was expected to go to bed at night like most other people. Under the 24-hour care arrangement, people in the personality disorder unit can sleep when they like and walk around when they like, which imposes what can only be described as a massive burden. It means that the staffing at night sometimes has to approach the intensity that applies during the day in order to keep an eye on people. That is absurd and it needs to be changed.

It will however be very hard for the staff to carry out that process of change with such a difficult group of patients, and I will not promise any precipitate changes because I will not be the person who risks being knifed in the back at 3 o'clock in the morning. I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to ensure that there is a more positive approach. I hope that, in committing ourselves to the future of the hospital we will enable the staff to provide the more positive approach that most of them want to provide.

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): I welcome the Fallon report and my right hon. Friend's attitude towards it. I agree with him about not acceding to the recommendation in the report to close the hospital down. In my view that would be plain silly. There is nothing wrong with the physical security or facilities at Ashworth. I live about a mile and a half from it and have a vested interest in knowing that to be true.

We have had investigation after investigation and report after report over the years, but no one has ever been given the power and authority to sort the mess out. The choice of chairman will be important. My right hon. Friend must select the right person for the job in the medium and longer term.

I hope that my right hon. Friend will bear it in mind that, although many people in Ashworth have a lot to answer for, many brave people have worked—and still work—there. Some whistleblowers lost their jobs, including my constituent Sue Machin, who was forced out of her job as a psychiatrist there because she tried to expose what was going on. She eventually won her case at an industrial tribunal after undergoing years of terrible stress. There are heroes there as well as villains.

Mr. Dobson: I am sure that that is true. I last went to Ashworth before it was Ashworth. My hon. Friend will understand what I mean—such places have their names changed. Some of the people who work in some of the medium-secure units that I have visited are heroes just for working there in very difficult circumstances. I want to try to ensure that the people who work there feel that they are getting the credit, the attention and the help that they deserve.

From my brief acquaintance with him, I am confident that the new chairman of the authority has the necessary drive, skill and management capacity to take on the task of at least getting the first response from Ashworth. I have told him that I should like him to take on the task for four or five months and if he wants to stay after that he is welcome. However, I have agreed that if it is so demanding that he wants to return to Morecambe bay, he can.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Whom can the public blame at the top for what has happened over the past six years? Let us have names. Which Ministers were responsible?

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Oh, come on.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Oh yes. The right hon. Lady did not get to the Dispatch Box because she was so frightened about her image. I am sorry to raise this controversial issue. Who is to blame for what happened during the regime of relaxation? Why was there no monitoring by Ministers at the Department of Health in the early 1990s to ensure that the changes that were being introduced would not be abused as they have been? People need a politician to blame for what has happened.

Mr. Dobson: As my hon. Friend knows, I am the last to go round blaming people—with the exception of a few Conservatives. The previous Government implemented the Blom-Cooper report when the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) was Secretary of State for Health. In view of the infinite capacity of the civil service and the national health service to take

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donkeys' years to do anything, as I have discovered over the past 18 months, I have some sympathy with the right hon. Lady's attempts to get things done quickly, even if that has had ill consequences.

The almost universal application of the liberalisation after the Blom-Cooper report, which was directed not at the personality disorder unit but at the rest of the hospital, was effected pretty thoughtlessly by whoever was responsible on the ground. It was predictable—common sense must have suggested—that a group of highly intelligent, manipulative people would be better able to exploit reduced security and greater freedom than the average person suffering from mental illness in another part of the hospital. Quite frankly, in respect of some of the management and professional staff involved, it is as though the words "Abandon common sense all ye who enter here" were written over the doorway of Ashworth.

Orders of the Day

Local Government Bill

[Relevant documents: The Eleventh Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on the Implementation of the Best Value Framework (HC 705-I) and the Government's Response thereto (Cm 4082).]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown).

4.35 pm

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill provides for the replacement of crude, universal council tax capping with new reserve powers to protect the council tax payer and new arrangements for achieving best value in the development and delivery of local authority services. It provides a crucial role for the new National Assembly in Wales. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) will say something about that later.

Modern councils put people first. They are at their best when leading their local communities, working with partners to develop and achieve a vision for their area, striving for continuous improvement in the delivery of local services, involving and responding to local people and building effective partnerships with local businesses and the local community.

The Bill is the first step in the wider modernisation of local government set out in our White Paper last year. Our proposals to transform the political management and ethical framework of councils will be published soon in a draft Bill and other measures will follow.

The Bill concentrates on the bread-and-butter issues: raising the quality of public services to improve the quality of people's lives; creating a level playing field to ensure real and fair competition in service provision and the efficiency gains that competition brings; and recognising the immense contribution made by public servants in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

The Government's belief in modern public services comes from our traditional values of community and solidarity. We believe that, by the strength of our common endeavour, we can achieve more than we achieve alone.

That is why communities work together, through their local councils, to ensure the provision of education for children, homes for the homeless, care for the elderly and vulnerable, regeneration for run-down neighbourhoods, crime prevention and community safety; and to plan better public transport. That contrasts with the open hostility of the Conservative party to the very idea of community. The Government embrace the values of community; the Conservatives scorn them. That is why the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), a Front-Bench health spokesman for the Conservative party, described community as "atavistic, backward-looking, irrational".

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): As the Minister is so very keen on the importance of local communities and

local self-government, will she give an assurance that it will soon be possible for the local community in Oxfordshire to decide the level of council tax?

Ms Armstrong: I shall not be tempted to breach the rules of the consultation. I enjoyed receiving the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues from the local authority this morning, when I made clear the boundaries within which we work at the moment. The Bill provides slightly different boundaries, and I hope that he will be interested in hearing about them later in my speech.

It is because we believe so strongly in the power of community and the potential of modern public services that we have zero tolerance of inefficiency, mismanagement and waste. It is because the Conservatives care so little for community that they have zero tolerance of public services. That is why they oppose the Bill. People expect a bigger say and a better deal from the services that their councils provide, with more transparency and involvement in the way in which decisions are made about the cost, quality and delivery of local services.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I agree with my hon. Friend about the need for greater transparency, but how will the capping of council tax benefits help to ensure greater transparency and accountability?

Ms Armstrong: As I will say later, the Bill proposes a sharing of responsibility between national and local taxpayers on decisions that are made locally.

People expect public services to be delivered in the most effective and efficient way, meeting their expectations on cost and quality. They are more concerned with how services are delivered than with who delivers them. They are fed up with the old ideologies which pitted public sector against private. What matters to them, and what matters to us, is what works.

Modern public services are the foundation stone for modernising local government. The best councils recognise their success and seek continuous improvement. The worst councils should be changing now, or face intervention by Government. The average cannot afford to be content with mediocrity.

Best value is far from a soft option, with four disciplines driving standards even higher. First, the public will set the standard and see the outcome. Secondly, standards and performance will be independently audited. Thirdly, tough inspection regimes will make sure that all councils are up to scratch. Fourthly, if they are not up to scratch, the Government will intervene to protect our public services and the council tax payer.

Best value is based on four Cs: challenge whether a particular service is necessary or desirable; consultation with local people about the standards that they expect; comparison with the quality and cost achieved by other similar service providers; and competition, real and fair, to achieve the maximum value for money. When the Conservatives were in Government, they had their own version of the four Cs—capping, compulsion and central control.

The Bill seeks to define more closely the role of Government, away from centralisation to regulation. The Bill will shift power out of Whitehall to the town hall, but will make sure that individual citizens are protected as consumers and taxpayers. For too long, public service provision has been an ideological battleground between public and private sectors.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: The result was compulsory competitive tendering—which I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will now defend.

Mr. Jenkin: Is the Minister talking about the same Bill that we are considering in the House today? Does she accept that 27 new powers for the Secretary of State are specified in the Bill? The Bill, therefore, has a great deal to do with central control, including the continuation of capping by her Government.

Ms Armstrong: The Bill contains immense new powers for local people. Far from being a centralising measure, the Bill proposes to change the relationship between central and local government, and spells that out for the first time—something that the previous Government were not prepared to do.

Compulsory competitive tendering delivered some efficiencies, but at a cost. Too often, CCT meant the cheapest, rather than the most cost-effective. Contracts became straitjackets. Public services were delivered to minimal standards at minimal cost by minimalist providers.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way relatively early in her speech. On the subject of new powers, will she tell the House in what circumstances she would envisage using the new power that the Bill will confer on her and her right hon. and hon. Friends to cap local authorities below their standard spending assessment—which is, after all, the Government's own assessment of spending need?

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman obviously does not know that the provisions made by the Conservative Government gave exactly that ability. I shall describe the powers in the Bill later in my speech, and I am sure that he is happy to wait until then. Now, I intend to talk about CCT, even though the hon. Gentleman does not want me to remind the House or the people of the devastation that the Conservative Government were prepared to inflict on local government and local services through CCT.

Clause 18 will repeal CCT at the beginning of next year, as we promised in our election manifesto. In its place, the Bill introduces a duty of best value on all local authorities, including the Greater London Authority and its functional bodies when they are established.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Does the Minister accept that the new powers to issue guidance and, by regulation, to make changes mean that future Secretaries of State will be able to reintroduce the CCT regime without further recourse to primary legislation, which has to be passed by Parliament?

Ms Armstrong: No, I do not accept that. We are introducing a regime that is entirely different from compulsory competitive tendering—one that is far more flexible and more focused on local people and

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their ambitions. Best value is a duty to deliver services to clear standards of cost and quality by the most effective, economic and efficient means available. Competition will be a key management tool for delivering best value and driving up standards, but, unlike CCT, it will be fair competition and it will be a means to an end, rather than the end in itself. The hon. Gentleman should reflect on that explanation in order to get the real answer to his question.

Best value will raise standards of public services in line with public expectations. The service standards of all local authorities will be brought up to those of the top 25 per cent. As a result, an annual 2 per cent. efficiency target should be well within the reach of all local authorities. If services are poor or inefficient, it will be clear where accountability lies. Local people should not have to put up with failing public services and the Government will not hesitate to intervene to prevent the worst excesses of inefficiency and waste.

Most of local government shares our belief in modern public services. More than 100 local authorities across party boundaries are involved in best value pilot projects and more than 250 are involved in various best value initiatives. The Local Government Association has worked with us to promote service improvement and has set up its own improvement agency. Those bodies recognise the new challenges that best value poses for local councils: expectation of higher standards; a push for continuous improvement; and pressure for greater accountability.

Clause 3 places a duty on each authority to consult the people whom it serves. The duty of best value is owed not to central Government, but to the citizen. I want there to be growing engagement between the public and their local councils. The citizens charter went some way toward telling local people what they could expect from public services, but best value will mean local people telling local councils exactly what they expect from public services.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Given the Minister's emphasis on the needs of people in their own locality, which vary from area to area, can she confirm that the order-making mechanism contained in the Bill gives considerable flexibility to enable the National Assembly for Wales to deliver slightly different policies that are in line with the needs of local communities?

Ms Armstrong: Yes, I can confirm that, and the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central, who will wind up the debate, will reaffirm it. The Bill is the first to devolve powers to the National Assembly and I welcome the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) to the Chamber to celebrate that event.

Mr. Burstow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: No. I want to continue. I am prepared to take interventions, but the hon. Gentleman has already intervened once.

There is a national interest, too, in the level at which service standards are set. Therefore, clause 4 allows the Secretary of State, or the National Assembly for Wales, to specify performance indicators and standards in certain circumstances, accompanied by locally determined performance indicators and targets.

Clause 5 requires local authorities to carry out fundamental performance reviews of all their functions to consider new ways to deliver services and set targets to show continuous improvement.

Through the best value performance plan, a local authority will set out its targets and plans for the public and report on performance. Real local accountability will come when people can compare what a council says that it will achieve with what it actually achieves.

That brings me to audit and inspection. Clause 10 provides the Audit Commission with inspection powers to complement the work of the existing inspectorates. All functions will be subject to rigorous scrutiny. An inspectorate forum will take forward arrangements for joint monitoring of the delivery of best value, particularly where local priorities cross traditional boundaries.

We will ensure that collaboration between existing and new inspectorates works properly. For example, we will extend the role of the Housing Corporation to enable it to provide consultancy and support services to assist the Audit Commission to carry out its new duties under best value.

Police authorities will be subject to the duty of best value, in line with their statutory function to maintain an efficient and effective police force. Policing has a unique tripartite structure, within which chief constables also have a role in delivering best value. Therefore, I propose to table amendments in Committee to reflect the role of chief constables under best value and to define more clearly the respective roles of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and the Audit Commission. I also propose to table a further amendment in Committee to deal with the funding of inspections.

In most cases where the auditor or inspector recommends action, I expect the local authority to act speedily on the recommendations. In the first instance, councils will be expected to put their own house in order and will have the opportunity so to do. However, there must be a line in the sand. Clause 13 sets out the enforcement powers that the Secretary of State or the National Assembly in Wales may use in the cases of the worst failures. We will develop a protocol with local government to ensure that there is a clear understanding about when those might be used. Indeed, we are already discussing that in partnership with local government.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Will the hon. Lady give us some idea of the time span for the procedure that would end in confiscation? I do not necessarily have an argument with it, but I am concerned that, by the time that it happens, the dust will lie upon the problem that inspired the reaction in the first place.

Ms Armstrong: I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman say that. The Conservative Government never used their most severe powers. The reality is that, in the initial period, a performance plan, on which local people will be able regularly to give their views, will have to be published every year. Of course, the auditor will make an annual report and trigger inspections if necessary and inspectors will, if necessary, report to the Secretary of State. At this stage, I do not want to go into precise

timetables. We want to discuss those details in Committee and to produce guidance. They are a part of our discussions with the wider partners with whom we are developing the programme and we are learning from the pilot projects.

Innovation and reform are at the heart of modern public services, so clauses 14 to 16 contain powers to facilitate best value. We expect local authorities to look at a wide range of options for service delivery, focusing on innovation and new ways of working, and testing the boundaries of service delivery and best practice.

Where it will improve the standards of public service, we want local authorities to be able to enter into new forms of partnership. Instead of the sterile debates of the past, which paid more attention to the means of service delivery than to the quality of services delivered, we want to promote public-private partnerships—a third way for public services.

Also, best value will encourage local authorities to work in partnership with other public bodies—pooling budgets, making better use of assets and ending some of the false boundaries between different deliverers of public service. Some of what was revealed in the statement earlier this afternoon by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health shows the importance of enabling local authorities and health authorities to work together much more closely. At the same time, however, best value will encourage partnerships with private enterprise and voluntary organisations to secure new expertise and greater investment, and to promote innovation. The scope of those enabling powers will have to be carefully drawn. Therefore, clause 15 sets out the detailed process for using them, including further scrutiny by Parliament.

Compulsory competitive tendering has tied public services in too much red tape for far too long. Modern public services require flexible procurement practices, and it is high time that the legislative framework was amended to reflect that. That is not just the view of the Government: it is also the view of both the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry.

In a recent open letter to the Prime Minister, the CBI stated:

"The major task ahead is to break the CCT mindset . . . Best value should be the driver and therefore the centrepiece of local government reform . . . building innovative partnerships between councils and business and establishing the link between service improvements and better treatment of staff."

In November last year, I was pleased to receive the first-ever joint delegation from the public and private employers and trade unions working in local government. Those social partners came to press for the best value provisions that are contained in this Bill.

Local authorities need confidence in their partners, and private companies need to be able to demonstrate that they are good employers. Clause 17 gives the Secretary of State and the National Assembly for Wales the power to amend the categories of "non-commercial matters" that authorities may take into account in selecting tenderers and awarding contracts.

The House may remember the widespread support for the private Member's Bill sponsored in the previous Session by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King)—whom I am pleased to see in the Chamber this afternoon—which sought to make a similar amendment. That Bill was killed off by objections from the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). However, the Government are today introducing those measures in this Bill. Public procurement policy has moved on from the sterile ideology of the 1980s, even if the Conservative party has not.

We shall consult widely on the use of those new powers. We believe that it is essential that our approach enjoys the support of partners in the public and private sectors. Our manifesto promised to replace crude and universal capping with new reserve powers to limit excessive council tax rises. The Bill delivers on that pledge as part of a wider package of measures aimed at improving local financial accountability. We hope that the powers will be used rarely, but we will step in to protect council tax payers, should that prove necessary. We are not a tax-and-spend Government and we do not want tax-and-spend councils.

Mr. Burstow: While I understand that the Minister and the Government do not want high-spending councils, surely that must be a matter for the local electorate. Capping, whether it be crude and universal capping of the sort that the previous Government imposed or the so-called sophisticated capping to be introduced by the Bill, blurs accountability and denies the electorate the opportunity properly to judge their council.

Ms Armstrong: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman does not understand what tax-and-spend councils mean. Such councils throw money at a problem rather than trying to sort it out and achieve the best outcome. We want to ensure that councils tackle their problems in that way. We are determined that the national interest, about which I shall speak later, is taken into account in the settlement; that has never been possible. It is not honest to say that national Government have no interest in what local government does. We have to work as partners. The Bill spells out the framework within which that partnership will work.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): In the Minister's opinion, have the Government, during their term of office, capped only authorities that have been irresponsible spenders?

Ms Armstrong: We are at present using the legislation introduced by the previous Government. It does not give me the flexibility or the terms that the Bill will give me.

We are not a tax-and-spend Government. Councils know that, if they budget responsibly, they will not be affected, but if they fail to deliver responsible budgets or if their efficiency and economy fall short of the standard that we expect, we will use these powers to protect the council tax payer.

The new powers contained in clause 23 and schedule 1 are much more flexible than the current capping powers. They will enable the Secretary of State in England or the National Assembly in Wales to look back over several years in deciding whether a council's budget is excessive and allow factors such as demonstrable support for spending plans among the local electorate and the delivery of best value to be taken into account.

The Bill provides for new and more flexible ways to regulate budget levels and allows for a more managed approach by councils that have to reduce their budgets if

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the Secretary of State or the Assembly determines that a council's budget requirement is excessive. As we announced in the White Paper and at the time of the local government settlement, we are implementing a scheme under existing powers that will limit the amount of subsidy paid to local authorities which increase council taxes above a guideline that we shall set annually. Individual benefit recipients will not be affected. Where a council does not exceed the guideline, it will receive subsidy as now. If a council increases its council tax above the guideline, it will have to make a contribution to the council tax benefit costs arising from that increase.

The technical provision in clause 24 provides that, where the authority making increases above the guideline is a major precepting authority, such as an English county council, it will make the contributions to the billing authority. In order to ensure fairness, no local area where a higher-than-average proportion of council tax is met from benefit will be affected more than the average.

The Government believe that it is right that, where councils make increases above the guideline, costs should fall in whole or in part locally rather than nationally. The scheme is currently out to consultation and we shall report back to the House on it at the time of the settlement debate.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Despite the rules on averaging, does not the scheme mean that a local authority with a large number of properties in, say, band A or B—presumably housing poorer people—will none the less pay more than an authority in, say, Surrey or North Yorkshire as a contribution to council tax spending?

Ms Armstrong: The Bill allows us to bring down to the average. However, it would be difficult to ask people who are below the average to make a larger contribution to take them up to the average. At present, the national taxpayer picks up the benefit bill. We believe that there should be some local accountability regarding the effect of local decisions. The burden should not be passed completely to the national taxpayer.

Mr. Curry *rose—*

Ms Armstrong: I have already answered the right hon. Gentleman's question.

The scheme, as I have described it, is out to consultation. It is not part of the Bill, but part of the consultation that is currently taking place. The results of that consultation will come before the House in a regulation that hon. Members must debate. The details are part of the consultation process, not part of the legislation. Existing legislation enables us to do that.

Mr. Curry: Is it not true, none the less, that the relative burden on council tax payers in Liverpool will be greater than that on council tax payers in Surrey or North Yorkshire?

Ms Armstrong: I have already answered that question. If they do not make the average in Surrey, they will not contribute up to the average. If they have well above the average in Liverpool, council tax payers will not be asked to contribute the amount that they could have been asked to pay if we had gone for the whole lot. We have sought to be fair by ruling that no council will pay above the average.

Dr. Lynne Jones: My hon. Friend refers to accountability, but surely local governments are accountable through the ballot box. That is where accountability lies. The waters have been muddied in the past 20 years or so by the complexities of local government finance and the fact that so much money is raised centrally rather than locally. These measures will make local government finance even more complex. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) pointed out that the poor will subsidise the poorest. That is surely not a system that a Labour Government should be comfortable about introducing.

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend seems to forget that, at present, the national taxpayer pays for local council policies through council tax benefit subsidies. That does not help local accountability. We want to share accountability between local and national taxpayers, and that is what this measure will ensure. I remind the House that no council needs to see council tax benefit subsidy limitations if it sets its council tax at a level below the guideline. Taken together, the changes will contribute to a further strengthening of local accountability.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Consultation will occur after councils have set their budgets. That is hardly fair.

Ms Armstrong: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman is correct. However, the consultation is outside this process and the budgets do not have to be set until later. The councils know what is going on, and they will listen to our discussions not just in the Chamber, but in Committee.

With central Government no longer telling councils what they may spend, local people will have more impact on the decisions taken by local councils regarding the taxes that they raise, the spending that they commit and the public services that they deliver.

The Bill modernises local government to enable the delivery of modern public services. Alongside our other local government reforms, it puts local people in the driving seat for reform, giving them a bigger say and a better deal from local councils.

The Bill defines the national interest in the workings of local government. It is in the national interest that service standards are high; that best value is gained for every penny of public money spent in the public or private sector; that local government, like central Government, is prudent and responsible; and that the council tax payer is protected from the wasteful and the profligate.

The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats do not understand that national interest. The Tories maintain their hostility to community and their support for capping, compulsion and central control. The Liberal Democrats seem not to care how high council tax gets or what the public get for their money.

The Bill honours our commitments to end crude, universal council tax capping and outdated compulsory competitive tendering. In their place, we shall strengthen

local financial accountability, provide new protections for the council tax payer and introduce a new duty of best value to raise the standards of public service and modernise public procurement.

The Bill has been broadly welcomed by public and private sector alike, by employers and employees, by local government across the parties and by trade unions. For too long, our public services have been marred by conflict and confrontation. Today, the Bill marks a new spirit of consensus and co-operation in the development of public services. I know that the Opposition do not like that. It is a third way, designed to reform public services, build new partnerships between the public and private sectors, encourage innovation and new forms of public service and protect the council tax payer.

This is a modernising Bill for a modern public service and I commend it to the House.

5.12 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): If the Bill promotes light, truth and harmony in local government, consensus, partnership and a better community spirit, we will be right behind it. The Minister knows full well that a sense of community is at the heart of modern Conservatism. If that raises a wry smile on the Government Benches, it is simply because the hon. Lady's ludicrous posturing at the Dispatch Box makes her look ridiculous. What was interesting about her performance was the way in which it made Labour Members sizzle with enthusiasm. The Labour party obviously has a sense of unity of purpose, consensus and partnership about the Bill, which confers 27 powers on the Secretary of State to exercise over local government.

Another interesting point about the Minister's performance was that it was characterised by the tell-tale signs that emerge when the legislative cart has been put before the policy horse. First, she announced amendments to the Bill as she moved Second Reading. The pilot schemes for best value are still in progress, so the Government are still formulating the policy on which we are being asked to legislate. Secondly, the hon. Lady spoke about what the Bill does not contain rather what it does contain, and she made little mention of the 27 new powers. There is also a tell-tale clause of the kind that appears in a Bill when there is a muddle; I refer to clause 14, which deals with the use of secondary legislative powers to amend primary legislation. That suggests that the Government do not now know what changes need to be made, and will think of them later.

If ever there was an enabling Bill, this is it. Support for an enabling Bill is always a little deceptive because people are supporting the actions that they hope the Secretary of State will take with the new powers, not the way in which the powers will actually be used. The test of support for the Bill will be when it is used.

I am reminded of the section in "Alice in Wonderland"—the *Hansard* editors will have to be lenient with me—where, according to my recollection, having run the race that nobody wins, Alice asks what it all means. The Queen of Hearts replies, "Words mean what you want them to mean". That just about sums up this Bill. It includes policies that are still subject to consultation.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Given that the hon. Gentleman is deploring the Henry VIII provisions in the Bill, will he tell the House how many such provisions were introduced during the Conservative Administrations and how many of those he voted against?

Mr. Jenkin: That is a good question. We should be extremely careful—indeed, it should be drawn to the House's attention—when such powers are being used. They should be used as little as possible. We will test the purpose behind the powers, and the Government's intention of using them, as the Bill goes through the House—as is our job as the Opposition, and as was, no doubt, the hon. Gentleman's job when he was in opposition.

When the Deputy Prime Minister published the White Paper in July, we welcomed the fact that the Government were taking the opportunity to look afresh at the range of policies affecting the way in which local government is run. We said that we would judge the Government's proposals according to whether they would increase accountability, transparency and fairness in local government. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said,

"We must think about how we can once more make local democracy vital and effective."

We did not neglect local government when in office. I am proud of the Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980, which introduced compulsory competitive tendering for council services. That was the start of the revolution in the delivery of council services that "best value" seeks to continue. Leading councils pioneered the idea of the enabling council. Hundreds of councils succeeded in transforming the quality of their services at reduced cost, and in so doing, transformed their culture on behalf of the communities that they serve. We applaud their success. Despite Labour's bitter opposition at the time, we welcome its acceptance that competition and transparency have a vital role in the delivery of council services.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): How many local authorities took advantage of powers under the 1980 Act prior to the Local Government Act 1988, which made competitive tendering compulsory rather than voluntary?

Mr. Jenkin: Obviously, powers under the 1980 Act were not enough. That is why I am proud of the later legislation that extended CCT.

We also introduced the Education Reform Act 1988, which transferred powers from local education authorities to schools and pupils, the Environmental Protection Act 1990, which empowered local authorities to take action on the environment, and the Community Care (Direct Payments) Act 1996, which transferred powers from local authorities, giving independence and choice to millions of dependent elderly people.

We are, however, prepared to evaluate our record in local government; we acknowledge that we need to make a fresh start. As a party, we are seeking to change our whole attitude to local government. The House should ask some fundamental questions: what do we want local councils to do in the next century; what should be their functions, powers and responsibilities; and how can we make them both more independent of the hand of central Government and more accountable to their communities? *[Interruption.]* I make no apology for surprising some hon. Members. That is in the interests of local government.

[Mr. Jenkin]

Our objective should be to improve the effectiveness, relevance, accountability and attractiveness of local government. Our guiding principle should be that decisions in our society are taken as closely as possible to the people who are affected. We should aim to strip away the controls that fetter councils—including, eventually, capping.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Conservative Members who have been Local Government Ministers warmly welcome and endorse what my hon. Friend has just said and look forward to the development of his argument. Will he bear in mind the fact that forward-looking Conservative-controlled local authorities such as Wiltshire county council are being held back by the inability of the Government to do joined-up local government, let alone joined-up government? The new Government's inability to manage their reforms—for example, in health, with the problems of bed-blocking that result—is making life extremely difficult for local authorities.

Mr. Jenkin: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend.

Many may have thought that new Labour meant it when it said at the general election that it supported decentralisation. However, the Bill takes local councils in precisely the opposite direction. From the noises made by new Labour in opposition, voters and even some Members of Parliament understood that new Labour opposed central Government rules on competitive tendering and spending levels.

Behind the smokescreen of best value, the Bill replaces the clear and simple discipline of competitive tendering with a highly ambiguous and convoluted regime of central Government powers that are potentially far more draconian. Even the powers to be exercised by the Secretary of State are entirely at his discretion. Instead of abolishing capping in the name of financial freedom for local councils, the Bill replaces fair and open capping powers with a system of capping that is secretive and retrospective, and gives yet more powers to the Secretary of State.

Ms Armstrong: Is the hon. Gentleman telling us that the Conservative party has changed its position and is now against capping?

Mr. Jenkin: Our position is perfectly clear. We believe that capping should be overt and clear. In the long run, in an ideal world, we should be able to reform local government so that capping is no longer necessary. At present it seems difficult to imagine—as the hon. Lady did when she was in opposition—circumstances in which capping can just be dumped.

If any hon. Members still believe that the Bill is a decentralising measure, they had better disabuse themselves of that notion. There are no provisions in the Bill to produce accountability. There is nothing that puts powers back into the hands of local communities. If she disagrees, the hon. Lady may rise and tell the House why.

Ms Armstrong: I have already made my speech.

Mr. Jenkin: That makes the point.

The abolition of CCT and capping are old Labour commitments that new Labour was never able to escape. The Bill bolsters the position of the Secretary of State by granting him a host of new powers to intervene and by imposing a swathe of new obligations on councils.

Far from the decentralisation that many may have expected, the Bill represents a further lurch towards the nationalisation of local councils, presented in a package designed to be all things to all men. The Secretary of State spent more than a year trying to reconcile what councils and trade unions wanted with the realities of office. What he has produced is not as it is intended to seem. In that respect, it is, perhaps, another manifestation of the third way.

CCT has been a success. By the end of the 1970s, most local authority services had become little more than a union-dominated racket to provide jobs for the boys. CCT has produced huge savings across the range of local government services to which it applies, resulting in an average overall reduction of 7 per cent. in service costs. Moreover, contrary to the scaremongering of Labour's vested interests, it has done so while improving the quality of services offered to communities: in many cases, services have improved beyond recognition, both from the point of view of those who depend on them and from the point of view of the employees who work in them.

Mr. Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley): I would be the last to deny that CCT has resulted in some minor improvements in transparency and has clarified local authorities' thinking. Does the hon. Gentleman agree, however, that the vast majority of the savings attributed to CCT have been caused by driving down the wages and working conditions of some of the poorest people employed in local authorities—in many cases black people living in the inner cities, and women? The legislation has been racist and sexist, and its effect has been to impoverish people.

Mr. Jenkin: Is the hon. Gentleman implying that every local authority subcontractor is somehow racist and sexist, and drives people into the dirt? Is he seriously suggesting that a refuse collector employed by a private company today earns less than a refuse collector in 1979? If so, he really is trying to pull the wool over our eyes. What betrays the hon. Gentleman is his grudging admission that there was at least something good about compulsory competitive tendering. Coming from him, that is good enough for me. That betrays how Labour's opposition to CCT was bogus from the start. CCT has been a success.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: If the hon. Lady will allow me, I shall make some progress.

The Labour manifesto said:

"We reject the dogmatic view that services must be privatised to be of high quality."

We agree with that. Competitive tendering was never intended, per se, to force privatisation; it merely requires the direct labour force to compete and to be compared with the private sector. Local authorities are not forced to accept the lowest bid; they are merely obliged to have good reasons for not doing so. There is nothing dogmatic in that.

If best value is to work, it will have to replicate those processes. It is a question of sound financial management and respect for taxpayers' money and for the fact that it should be spent carefully, rather than frittered away. New Labour's opposition to competitive tendering reeks of dogma—the outdated socialist dogma which says that only the state can provide public services, and that profit is to be reviled. New Labour now claims to accept that those ideas belong in the past, but many in the rank and file of the Labour party and its union paymasters still cling fondly to their collectivist doctrines.

Ms Armstrong: How does the hon. Gentleman reconcile what he has just said with the CBI's statement that—

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): They are a bunch of socialists.

Ms Armstrong: I see. Perhaps I should not be intervening.

The CBI says that CCT has really had its day. It says:

"Best value must retain the competitive principles of CCT,"

but

"remove its fundamentally adversarial nature and replace this with consultation and shared objectives."

Does the hon. Gentleman not agree with that?

Mr. Jenkin: No, I do not. I did not agree with the CBI when, for example, it supported the closed shop. It was wrong about that, and even the Labour party has accepted that. The Institute of Directors, in a survey of its members, found that 49 per cent. of them do not think that replacing CCT with best value will improve services for local council tax payers, and only 33 per cent. think that it will.

It is difficult, however, to argue about the merits of best value on the basis of a Bill that contains virtually nothing other than a raft of extra powers for the Government. It is on that basis that we should discuss the legislation.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Does my hon. Friend agree with the leader of the Conservative members on Basildon council—with whom I have consulted on the Bill this afternoon—who describes the Bill as going backwards into the future? Basically, all the consultation flummery and best value is simply a smokescreen behind which Labour councils will be able to take back control of the services that the Conservative Government so successfully privatised.

Mr. Jenkin: That is certainly one of the dangers of the Bill. But it all depends on how the Secretary of State chooses to exercise his powers. Of course, CCT was not perfect—

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central) *rose*—

Mr. Jenkin: I should make progress. I owe the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) an intervention at some stage, but I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Illsley: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) who has just referred to the successful privatisation of local government services? Does that not contradict his earlier statement that CCT was not about the privatisation of services but was to achieve better value, or whatever?

Mr. Jenkin: Apart from the Bank of England—and even that example might be questionable—can the hon. Gentleman give an example of a business which has been successfully nationalised? Of course CCT was not perfect: the sustained policy of non-co-operation pursued by Labour councils meant that tight regulations had to be introduced to ensure compliance with the spirit of competitive tendering, and we acknowledge that even that failed with the worst Labour councils. One of the great ironies of politics is that the pride which Labour councils express in their direct labour organisations is matched only by their reluctance to expose the performance of those organisations to competition.

The unions hope that best value will reward that reluctance; they hate the discipline of CCT, and hope that best value will protect them from the rigour of competition, at the expense of council tax payers. Is that the intention of the Bill, as my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) suggested? Alternatively, is best value, like the lager, intended to reach the parts that CCT could not reach?

Dr. Lynne Jones: The hon. Gentleman talks about best value as though it were not supported by his Conservative colleagues. Do not Conservative local authorities support the move to best value?

Mr. Jenkin: Many authorities will support best value if it is implemented in the way that they expect, but the Bill provides no certainty about how best value will be implemented.

Compulsory competitive tendering provides a concrete framework to ensure competitive local council services. The White Paper stated that best value reviews will be required to

"embrace fair competition as a means of securing efficient and effective services."

I have just made the same point to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones). The Bill gives no indication of how competition will be provided for. The White Paper offers a range of options, including benchmarking; contracting out all, or part, of a service; joint ventures; competitive tendering of various kinds; or even full privatisation—yes, that, too, is in best value. However, there is virtually nothing about the discipline of competition in the Bill, and nothing to suggest how it will be applied.

What are we to believe? Will the Secretary of State bring the full rigour of competition to bear on recalcitrant, inefficient councils, or will the Bill achieve what many councils hope and allow them to escape the discipline of competition? The Bill provides no discipline for the Secretary of State in the exercise of his powers, and that is its fundamental problem.

The Bill creates no obligation for the Secretary of State to treat similar councils in a similar way. He can discriminate in favour of some councils and against others. The Bill is an invitation to cronyism of the

[Mr. Jenkin]

worst kind, which is already endemic in Labour councils. Today, *The Birmingham Post* reported:

"Union leaders were secretly recorded urging a Labour councillor to secure work for party activists in a 'jobs for the boys' row in a Midland council."

The Labour councillor who blew the whistle deserves to be congratulated on showing such courage, but what he revealed was deeply disturbing. He said:

"They were saying co-operate in finding jobs for these people or all hell will break loose and the whole service will be in dispute. It was an arrangement they have had for years in the past and the Labour group knows about it but doesn't do anything."

That is Labour in local government and, if best value is to succeed, that is what Labour must confront.

The Conservatives want what best value sets out to achieve: to get the benefits of competition and to increase local discretion. Good councils are already pursuing best value, but the Bill will dilute competition and hugely increase central control, making local councils more answerable than ever to Whitehall. The emphasis on flexibility, which we hear so much about, encourages the expectation that councils will be able to take their own decisions, but, in reality, the final word on flexibility will rest with the Secretary of State. The onus will be solely on him to challenge the corruption in the party that he represents in Parliament.

As with the proposals for best value, the Government's changes to the capping regime face both ways. Capping started as a way of protecting ratepayers from the excesses of Labour-run councils in places such as Lambeth and Liverpool, but no one can feel easy about the way in which it has grown. Councils need more freedom of manoeuvre in their financial affairs, but, equally, the council tax payer needs protection from excessive local tax demands. As the Government now recognise, central Government have an interest in how much is spent by local councils. Perhaps that new-found caution is behind the Deputy Prime Minister's rapprochement with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Rate capping is not being abolished; it is being modernised.

Taken in isolation from any review of accountability or structures, the measures in the Bill move in the wrong direction. The refusal to publish provisional capping limits, the use of following-year capping, the taking into account of previous years' budgets and the potential clawback of central Government funds for council tax benefit do nothing to address the fundamental problem.

As the Local Government Association points out, the proposed council tax benefit subsidy limitation will hit the poorest areas hardest. In its briefing, the association says:

"the guideline increases could be seen as a direct substitute for crude and universal capping."

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): The capping measure is, in principle, very similar to measures introduced by the hon. Gentleman's party in government to limit the amount of housing benefit that was paid, and to make councils pay an element of that benefit when private rent levels exceeded market value.

Mr. Jenkin: This is a novel concept in regard to accountability in politics. Whatever the former Opposition's policies were, when they become a Government they justify what they did previously on the basis of what the new Opposition did when they were in government. I do not think that the British people will be very impressed by that—and councillors up and down the land will not be very impressed by it, either.

Local people have too small a stake in the budget decisions made by their local councils. Councils are not properly accountable to the communities that they serve, and the Bill represents a missed opportunity to deal with that.

If we are to have capping, the system needs to be clear. Universal capping may have been crude, but it was transparent, and councils knew where they stood. Under the Government's proposals, councils and officials will be confused and uncertain, and local communities will be even more so. Crude and universal capping—the target of the Labour manifesto—is to be replaced by capping that is secretive and retrospective. The Bill makes capping personal: it will be a matter of choice for Ministers, and I assure the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) that they will find it no easier to exercise their powers on that basis than to exercise them on the present basis.

Once again, the Government have achieved the worst of both worlds, which is the essence of what we are discovering their "third way" to be. They have produced more apparent latitude for councils to tax and spend, with none of the reforms that are necessary to ensure that such freedoms are exercised in a responsible manner. The fact is that the Government have no real interest in improving accountability, because they know that the true cost of Labour in local government is very high. The most outrageous council taxes are charged by Labour; the worst-indebted councils are Labour. Labour councillors have been gaoled, investigated by police or subject to allegations in Doncaster, Wakefield—[HON. MEMBERS: "Westminster."] I hear the name of one local authority from Labour Members, but I can mention a few more.

In Hull, Labour does not trust its local members to select candidates. Then there is Slough, and Birmingham—where a Labour party member has called for an inquiry into sleaze and intimidation. There is Welwyn Hatfield, and Reading—where a fraud squad investigation of the conduct of the direct service organisation was passed to the Crown Prosecution Service. There are Hackney—as we well know—Islington and Coventry. Those are just the top 10. In many parts of the country, Labour remains a byword for mismanagement, incompetence and downright corruption.

We welcome the idea of beacon councils—we are in favour of excellence in local government—but nothing in the Bill defines the criteria for such status, which will be yet another favour for the Secretary of State to bestow or withhold. Once again, he is taking the power to treat similar councils differently, and that will be yet another incentive for councils to curry favour from Whitehall rather than standing up for the interests of their electors.

Either the Bill threatens to let bad councils get away with inefficiency and excessive taxation, or it will open ever more opportunities for Ministers to crack down, which was not quite the expectation of many people who voted for the Government. The Bill represents a sweeping increase in the powers of central Government. It is a further step towards complete control from the centre—the nationalisation of local government. Under the Bill,

there is a new panoply of discretionary controls. Although they go in name to the Secretary of State, it will be the Treasury that holds the purse strings ever more securely.

Best value is open to abuse, both by irresponsible councils and by the Secretary of State. It can make it harder for contractors to provide services for well-run councils and to deliver good value and good services to residents, while opening opportunities for Labour to hand out more jobs for the boys. Even the best-run councils will live in fear of the Secretary of State exercising his new and wide-ranging discretionary powers, which ultimately provide the means by which the Treasury can discipline local government beyond the reach of any democratic accountability.

The Bill is unclear. It is half baked. It creates the potential for overbearing central Government, but without the benefits of straightforward rules. The new discretions are open to abuse and capping is made a weapon shrouded in secrecy. The restoration of local government is a vital task for the House, but the Bill is the wrong way to go. I urge the House to reject it.

5.41 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) because I want to congratulate him. Today, we have probably seen one of the greatest examples for a long time of bare-faced cheek from any Conservative Member. I welcome his conversion to a belief in local government. It is just a pity that, during the 18 years that they were in government, the Conservatives showed little or no sympathy for local government.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in the Lobby to vote against the Henry VIII clause in the Bill?

Mr. Bennett: I would certainly be pleased, if I were to serve on the Committee, to vote against the Henry VIII clause. I agree with the hon. Gentleman: we should not be putting such clauses in legislation, but I wish that the previous Administration had been as good at preventing their introduction as some of us on the Back Benches.

I welcome the proposals to get rid of compulsory competitive tendering because I do not accept that that practice did anything useful for local government. It led to a huge waste of resources because one group of people bid for contracts and another group of people tried to manoeuvre things so that contracts were not awarded in a particular direction.

In so far as any money was saved, it was not a saving to the citizen, although it may have been a saving to the local authority. What tended to happen—it was certainly the experience in my constituency—was that people who lost a refuse contract were re-employed at lower rates of pay. They then had to apply for benefits of various sorts to make their income up to nearly what it was before. The difference was that, instead of having the honour of working to earn the money, they had to rely on the benefit system. That was not to anyone's advantage.

I also noticed that a substantial number of people in the poorest parts of my constituency lost their jobs and that those jobs went to people in richer parts of Stockport. Often, the job went from a breadwinner to someone who had the second job in a household. I do not object to second jobs in a household, but it meant that, in some of the poorest areas of Stockport and Tameside, jobs and income, which was earned as a right, disappeared. That not only impoverished people there, but reduced income opportunities for shops and the rest of the community.

I do not believe that compulsory competitive tendering did anything useful for local government. I welcome the fact that it is to be abolished, but there is not much else in the Bill that I have much enthusiasm for. The whole question of best value is verbiage. It has been already said several times that it is a smokescreen to cover up further Government control.

I applaud the aim of regenerating local government, but there are much simpler ways of doing that. Basically, one has to set local government free and trust the local electorate. Until we do that, it will be very difficult to regenerate local government.

We also have to look firmly at the powers of local government. As long as we continue to reduce the powers of local government, it will be very difficult to increase enthusiasm and interest in it. In the year I was born, the list of powers held by the local authority in the city of Manchester was very long. It was responsible for the gas supply, the electricity supply, the water supply, sewage disposal, buses and trams, refuse collection and disposal, housing and education from nursery schools up to further and higher education. It was responsible for social services provision and the poor law institutions were still under its control. It was also responsible for environmental health, the police, the fire service, parks, cemeteries, crematoriums, libraries, wash houses and baths. I could go on, right down to a substantial share in the Manchester ship canal. Those were extensive powers and they attracted to local government people who were enthusiastic about running those areas of responsibility.

Having taken virtually all those things away from local government, we have to recognise that the situation has changed. Even in the areas of responsibility still held by local government, there is a tendency for Whitehall to want to dictate what is done. We have to recognise that, unless we return to local government far more of those powers, we should stop calling it local government and accept that it is merely local administration of national services. Until we recognise the need to reverse that trend, it will be very difficult to rebuild local government.

It has been suggested to me that if we have elected mayors and cabinet government within local authorities, we will somehow attract people back to serve on councils. The first thing we have to recognise is that we must give much greater status to elected councillors and not, as so often happens, knock those individuals who provide a useful service. We must also recognise the problems of attracting people to such jobs. In the early part of the century many people did not have good educational opportunities. They ended up in relatively dead-end jobs and were very pleased to be able to show their skills and powers of leadership by becoming members of local councils. As a result of improved educational opportunities, the number of people in that situation has reduced dramatically. It is the same for Conservative councillors. Many people were forced into family businesses where they were not able to exercise their skills and they ended up being able to show those skills and their willingness to serve their community through the local councils. Many of those opportunities have now disappeared.

[Mr. Bennett]

It is extremely difficult for people to get time off work for such tasks. That is not because the employers say that they cannot have time off to work on the local council, but because it is spelt out clearly that if they do, their promotion chances will disappear. If we are to attract people back to serve on councils, we must accept that it is extremely important to ensure that local councillors have status and are offered the opportunity to take time off.

I believe that, as long as local authorities are receiving the vast majority of their funding from central Government, it will be extremely difficult to get back the autonomy. We should return the business rate to local authorities. Until we do, it will be difficult to give them the status they require.

I think that the Government must face the fundamental question of how far local people should be able to make choices. In my childhood, my father used to tell me firmly that I could make a choice if I lived in Greater Manchester. I could either aim to live in the city of Manchester and pay high rates and have high-quality services or I could live across the boundary in Stretford or one of the other smaller authorities surrounding Manchester and pay much lower rates and have much poorer services, unless I was crafty and able to slip across the border to enjoy some of the services provided by the city. People had a clear choice. That choice is increasingly disappearing. That is what worries me about best value. People should have the right to choose to have a lower level of services in their area and to pay less for it. That is difficult if there are national standards for education, social services and other functions.

Will best value apply to education? It seems logical that it should, but we do not want a proliferation of best value measures and the whole inspection system, which currently comes from the Department for Education and Employment.

If we are introducing best value, it is important to take a holistic view and measure all the services provided by a local authority. I am worried that any measuring exercise—be it the simple measurement of profits and costs in compulsory competitive tendering or a system that lays down criteria—will fail to look at the whole picture. I should like to illustrate that by considering the provision of services for the elderly in Reddish. It is not difficult to measure what is provided by social services, such as luncheon clubs and home helps. However, the authority provides or assists with a range of other equally important services for elderly people. The Reddish library provides an excellent service for the elderly to borrow books and talk to people. It is a helpful service for the community. The same is true of allotments, which are often run by a voluntary committee, many of whose members are pensioners. Stockport council should be proud of the support that it gives in that area, but the activity of the parks department is equally important. Stockport's neglect of the bowling greens has undermined an opportunity for elderly people to enjoy themselves. I should like all those services measured under best value, but it is difficult to achieve such holistic measurement.

Local authorities should not be judged on turnout. It is very important that people have the right to vote and to make local choices, but we should not castigate those who choose not to exercise the right to vote. If they do not bother to vote, we can assume that they are happy with the outcome. We should not get upset about turnout. If we are interested in a high turnout, we should give a 10 per cent. discount on council tax to those who turn out.

The issue is not that important. We should recognise that apathy has always been a feature in local elections. I looked at an electoral register from 1906 which showed the canvassing of the Labour party. It listed the reasons that people gave on the doorstep about why they were not going out to vote. They were: "They are all the same", "going later" or "possibly". The excuses for not voting have not changed much during this century. A few issues such as the poll tax will motivate large numbers of people to vote, but we should not get too hung up about turnout. The important point is that people have the opportunity to make choices.

Mr. Illsley: Does my hon. Friend hold the same view on electoral registration? The register in my area is many thousands of voters down on previous years. Does he think that local authorities should do more and should have more resources to improve the register?

Mr. Bennett: It is important that people should be registered to vote and that we should make it easy for people to vote, but, having done that, we should not get too upset if they remind us sometimes that it is not the most exciting thing. As we take ever more powers from local authorities, I do not blame people who do not particularly want to vote. Changing the system will not increase the number of people who vote.

I welcome the abolition of CCT, but I plead with my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench that if we can trust the people of Scotland and Wales with devolution, we ought to be able to trust the people of Denton and Reddish, Tameside and Stockport with far more powers to make their own decisions about the level of local government services that they want and how they want those services run. The more that we have to give them best value and diktats from Westminster, the more that we move from local government to local administration.

5.55 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Bill is nowhere near as bad as the Minister's speech made it appear. She is occasionally shrill and she does rather blather, but when she does both simultaneously it becomes very tedious.

The Minister mentioned her great four Cs—challenge, consultation, comparison and competition. She did not mention a fifth C—councillors. The motivation of councillors to carry out the changes matters most of all. If we move to new structures of government, the role of the back-bench councillor and the motivation to become a member of a council will be crucial to making the reforms work.

If the system becomes too executive, those who are not part of the inner circle will have to think hard about their function. We want councillors to carry the measures out on behalf of the community—a word that I am not frightened of. I hope that the Minister will remember that most of the community is not represented in the community consultations. Most people do not belong

to bodies, organisations or pressure groups and are not represented. We must be careful not to nominate too much. Consumers' organisations are entirely nominated, but claim to represent the community.

The Minister accused us of believing in capping, compulsion and central control, which are the three hallmarks of the Bill. Capping will be more extensive because it can be multi-annual and can be started below the level of the budget, which was not the case under the previous Government. Compulsion lies in the range of reserve powers to be exercised by the Secretary of State, who is part of the central Government.

It would be better if the Government agreed that they should have a view about what it is sensible and right for local authorities to spend. They spend a proportion of the national product and we cannot ignore that. The argument is about how that is done and where a fair balance lies. It is an argument not of principle, but about sensible methods and balance. If we put the issue on that basis, we may be able to reach broad agreement.

The Bill is not a charter for local government liberation. On best value and capping the Government have draconian powers of intervention. For once the notes that accompany the Bill are not as obscure as they often are for such legislation. Normally, they are even more complicated and less comprehensible than the Bill, but that is not so in this case. They give some useful examples, but the word "intervention" appears regularly. Let us not pretend that this is a charter of liberation. Even if local government has been let off the chain, it has certainly been caged, to use one of the Prime Minister's favourite metaphors.

There is merit in best value, but it is more all-pervading than compulsory competitive tendering. It has two fundamental elements. The first is a requirement to undertake reviews of every service within five years. It would be interesting to know in what order they are to be reviewed. Will the difficult ones be taken first; will it be left entirely to the local authorities; or will there be a mixture? Secondly, there is an obligation to produce annual performance plans, which will be subject to audit. An inspection will be either by the existing service inspectorate or by the new Audit Commission—which has become the 7th cavalry in all this—as the best value inspectorate for housing, highways and environmental health.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer), who is just leaving the Chamber, was leader of Manchester city council. He rightly said that CCT had served its purpose. It forced councils to define the cost of a service and to measure its delivery. Before CCT, local authorities were under no such obligation. In that sense, best value is a linear descendant of the principle of CCT. Without CCT there would not have been best value. To be honest about it, the one grew out of the other.

The essential question on reviews is how competitive the service will be required to be. The Government are to produce guidance on competition and it will be critical. Incidentally, I hope that the direct service organisations will have to keep separate accounts, as they do now, so that their finances can be checked and will remain transparent. An enormous amount hangs on the strength of the guidance, which I hope will be published before the Bill is considered in Committee.

Much depends on the powers of the Secretary of State, but some important issues will have to be sussed out in Committee. The role of competition is crucial. CCT got the private sector involved. What are the Government's intentions as regards exposing services to the private sector or to the voluntary sector, or indeed to competition from other local authorities? For example, in education there is the possibility of the private sector being brought in to take over failing local education authorities. Is that part of the best value exercise? Can it be extrapolated to different services?

How do we ensure coherence between the various inspection regimes? The Minister has admitted that there are many individual regimes. How do we achieve a cross-cutting—a favourite Labour word—assessment of them? How do we make sure that a local authority that subjects itself to a rigorous scrutiny and therefore marks itself down does not get hit harder than a local authority that is permissive in the way in which it examines its own services?

The advice that—presumably—the Audit Commission will have to give the auditors will be crucial in achieving coherence in the way in which the services are inspected. What is the methodology in the scrutiny? If there is to be intervention, it has to be triggered by a common standard. We have to be sure that the Secretary of State uses his powers on a basis that can be justified and that they are not seen to be used arbitrarily.

There are also bound to be questions on the timeliness of the performance information from local authorities. After all, the performance indicators will be crucial to the measurement process. We should demand much quicker delivery now that there is to be an annual performance plan. Local authorities have enough experience to generate performance indicators on a much better basis than now.

Some services will have to be pushed hard. Social services, for example, are not inherently less capable of being measured than other services, but operate in a culture in which such a process is alien—a culture that will have to be challenged.

It is important to remember that the services are for people. The process must not become an internal exercise which is hidden from the real world in which the services are supposed to be delivered. Therefore, the mechanisms for involving councillors—which is where the measure moves into the restructuring processes that the Government will no doubt introduce later—and for giving substance to the consultations are also important. I hope that the Minister will say more about that in Committee.

The role of the Audit Commission will also be crucial. The new leader of the Audit Commission, whom I appointed to the Audit Commission, will make a very good General Custer, although I think her fate will be a good deal more felicitous than that of the unfortunate American general. However, she has a difficult job to do. Where the Audit Commission has to inspect, is it intended that it should be an in-house inspection with Audit Commission inspectors, or will the Audit Commission be at liberty or be required to appoint external inspectors or invigilators? Will it have to lay down the rules by which they operate or the standards by which they measure? It is a crucial issue, not least for the staffing requirements of the Audit Commission. Clearly, it will need new staff to carry out its new functions. Will it still be responsible for

[Mr. David Curry]

the performance indicators? It has done a remarkably good job. It has sometimes made people feel uncomfortable, but it is no bad thing that people should feel uncomfortable about the revelation of statistics.

As we all know, the problem with local government is that the top few authorities are extremely good, the bottom few are catastrophic and in the middle is a large mass which is simply not very ambitious. The key is to bring that unambitious mass up to the level of the higher performers. As the Minister said, we want everybody to be as good as the top 25 per cent. However, by definition there will always be 75 per cent. which are not in the top 25 per cent., and it will be more difficult to keep the process going the third time round with the new steps of measurement. The criteria cannot remain the same; they will have to reflect the progress that has been made and the incremental improvement which it is realistic to demand of local authorities.

I now turn to the part of the Bill that deals with capping. The Minister said that "crude, universal capping" will be replaced by what I take to be sophisticated and selective capping. I am not sure that someone standing on the gallows would be overtly concerned as to whether he was about to meet his fate by a crude or a selective method.

Sir Paul Beresford: Judging by what is on the face of the Bill, I am sure that my right hon. Friend is right. It is subjective and selective and it is in the hands of the Secretary of State. However, the schedule is as crude and across the board as ever.

Mr. Curry: I am about to come to that. My hon. Friend, who has much experience of these matters as a giver and a receiver, is certainly right. It is not a new liberal regime; it has two differences from its predecessor. First, the Government can cap over more than one year. As I understand from the extremely complex Bill and the schedule, which is infernally complicated as my hon. Friend said, that is a notification procedure. Secondly, the Secretary of State can be more selective over the terms on which he caps local authorities. It will still be open to the Secretary of State to announce capping criteria in advance, which is a facultative ability under the legislation that the Government propose to repeal.

The explanatory notes do not make clear how the legislation will operate in practice. Some of the Secretary of State's powers are on the face of the Bill, others are not. In fact they stop half way through a sentence. The explanatory notes emphasise that the Secretary of State must have regard to principles, but do not say what those principles are. I am referring to paragraph 10 of the explanatory notes. We need to see the principles, as yet again it is not stated what the principles are. Yet again, the devil is in the detail; how it will operate in practice is what matters to people.

I agree with doing away with pre-announcement as it will force local authorities to make choices. The Minister saw representatives of North Yorkshire county council this morning while I was in a Select Committee meeting. My local authority explained that because of the change in methodology on the social services side it faces a serious problem. As a result, it is consulting the community on increasing the council tax precept by 7.5 per cent. to make good some of the deficit. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) said, an interesting early test of the Government's intentions will be whether or not they decide to live with that if it receives the approval of the local people.

There is quite a difficult distinction between designated and nominated authorities. As I understand the Bill, nominated authorities can have a notional budget which is below their present level of spend. They are then left to work out how to meet their capping requirements.

I now turn to the foggy bit of the Bill which deals with council tax benefit proposals. The provisions depend on regulations that have not yet been announced, so in a sense the Bill contains the gravy, but we do not yet have the meat which is the main course. As I understand it, each tier of authority when it calculates its own precept will have to take account of the extra benefit cost that it will entail and include it in the charge. The district will bill and pay to the county its share of the revenue, but the county has no power to hand back the extra element of the revenue that it raises through the benefit rules.

However, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) made clear, local authorities with a preponderance of properties in the lower bands will find that those living in such properties will be subsidising the poorest people who live in social housing. There is no escape from that. There may be a good intellectual argument for doing that and for sharing responsibility, but the idea that it has anything to do with more effective accountability simply does not stand up. It is so complex in nature that that line of argument is absolute baloney and the Minister would be well advised not to pursue it. The impact will be much tougher in some areas than in others.

If the legislation is carried out effectively, if people want to make it work, if there is a commitment on the part of councils and councillors, and if the regulatory framework is sensible—and if the Audit Commission, a sound body, applies it properly—there is no reason why the Bill should not be effective. The danger is that that will not happen, and that there will be slippage between existing and new requirements.

Before we exult too much at the liberation that the Bill represents, it is worth while pointing out that the Bill retains capping, that the Government have deferred on the regional assemblies—which are more important to the Liberal Democrats than to me—and that the Bill will not restore the business rate.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will recall our annual pilgrimage to see him when he was in his previous occupation. What is most depressing to some of us is that the three elements about which we complained the most—capping, the uniform business rate and the standard spending assessments—are to persist. The Government came to office with a massive majority to abolish those elements, but they are persisting with them—to the detriment of local democracy and local accountability.

Mr. Curry: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not mention the area cost adjustment. To have got this far in a debate on local government without mentioning the area cost adjustment—or, for that matter, additional

educational needs—is quite an achievement. The Government have flunked that matter for the next three years, and the hon. Gentleman can add to his litany of complaints those matters which affect his county, and mine.

Prescription underlines the Government's attitude in the Bill. I have read every single line of every single local government White Paper—there have been a whole string of them from the Government—and the attitude that comes through is permeated with the frustrated spirit of a colonial power exasperated at the antics of the natives, who must be brought under some firm government. There can be self-government in the little principalities, but the imperial framework will remain in place. Following my own experience, I do not necessarily disapprove because, in politics, people often have less choice than they think. We are more honest if we admit that.

The Bill is a different way of doing something that is essentially simple, and I am willing to give it a chance to work. However, we will need to know how it will work, because how the Secretary of State interprets his powers and uses his principles and guidelines will be fundamental. I hope that the Minister will come to the Committee well armed.

6.13 pm

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): I welcome the Bill, and I hope to keep my comments relatively brief as a consequence. I wholeheartedly welcome the abolition of universal capping, although I realise that the alternative is to give powers to the Secretary of State. However, anything that this Government come up with will be a lot better than what we had from the previous Government in terms of capping.

In 1990, 20 authorities were capped under the new financial regime imposed by the previous Government. One third of those 20 authorities were coalfield authorities, all of which finished up with very low standard spending assessments. Despite many complaints during the past eight years about the standard spending assessments—and many speeches in this House—there has been little adjustment to them. As a consequence, the low starting point for authorities with historically low SSAs, such as mine—Barnsley metropolitan borough council—has meant that we have had difficulty catching up.

We have had low and unfair revenue support grant settlements. Tory Members of Parliament have previously classified Barnsley—where unemployment levels are traditionally 2 to 3 per cent. higher than the national average—as more prosperous than Kingston upon Thames and, on one occasion, Runnymede.

The most recent settlement from the present Government has been much fairer to Barnsley and has recognised our particular problems. However, my local authority still faces £10 million of cuts in this year's budget, on the back of £40 million to £50 million of cuts since capping was introduced in its present form in 1990.

Even when standard spending assessments were increased for my local authority by about 6 per cent., it made very little difference to our problems because we were still subject to the capping criteria. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) referred to annual pilgrimages to Government Departments. I can recall pleading with Ministers in the last Government to increase our SSA in relation to the fire service, because the Home Office was telling us that South Yorkshire was below the Home Office's required standards for fire cover. That is how bizarre the system became.

I welcome many of the Bill's initiatives, such as the power to nominate and set targets for future years, or to use them as a baseline. In 1990, the cap came well into the financial year, and it was difficult for the local authority to adjust to the new budget once the financial year had started. It is a good idea for the Secretary of State to have the power to give local authorities a target to achieve in the present year or, alternatively, a target for the following year.

I hope that the Secretary of State will make good use of his power in the Bill to take into account anything he feels relevant in determining any future caps, in terms of designating or nominating authorities. In particular, I hope that he will take into account coalfield authorities where there is a history of low SSAs and low RSGs. In the past few years, colleagues and I have asked successive Governments to review the SSA methodology. It is unfair and arbitrary, and we have provided research from various universities to highlight the problem. The original Webber-Craig authorities looked at the matter, and the Special Interest Group of Metropolitan Authorities (Outside London) is doing so.

SSAs should reflect need. If the methodology introduced by the previous Government had been fair, some of the capping regimes that have been in place might not have been needed. My local authority is not a high-spending authority, and it is not profligate. It always features well in the performance indicators, but it has particular problems. It has low educational achievement and high unemployment, but it has no ethnic minority population, and we lose out under the SSA methodology because of that. Barnsley has been a prudent authority. However, after eight years of cuts, it is having to look at cuts in education and social services—the two areas where we have the greatest pressure.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), I welcome the abolition of compulsory competitive tendering. In my opinion, it was not a success—it failed miserably. It was intended to bring private enterprise and private sector dynamism into local government. However, the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) let the cat out of the bag when she talked about her local authority bringing services back into public control which had been successfully privatised. The latter was of course the idea behind CCT. However, it lowered standards and cut the quality of services dramatically.

The only way in which the private sector could profit from taking on contracts in areas such as cleaning was to cut the hours of work, the holidays and the wages of those employees involved in the contracts. Some of those private companies made vast profits—basically at the expense of the work force and the taxpayer. Those contracts had low quality specifications, and standards and quality fell. Wages and holidays were cut, and there were redundancies. At the end of the day, many employees had to turn to benefits—particularly family credit—to top up their earnings. So taxpayers were subsidising CCT and putting money straight into the coffers of private companies. In addition, the Equal Opportunities Commission produced reports detailing

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gender inequalities: many of the employees in those service areas were female and CCT discriminated against them.

I hope that best value will lead to a return to good-quality local services. Quality should be our byword and standards should be raised to the level of the best. The emphasis should be on quality, not on cheapness. We want to go back to having quality services in local government. I welcome the duty to consult that is placed on local authorities, because the public will have their say about the type and quality of public services they want. My local authority has in place mechanisms such as community partnerships whereby it can consult the public; it also regularly consults local business. Such consultation will provide information about how the local people want their services to be run and, more importantly, about whether they want a cheap and nasty service or a quality service to be provided in their area.

Clause 4 relates to performance indicators. My local authority has nothing to fear in that respect, because it is a hard-working and low-spending authority. However, an article in this week's issue of the public sector finance magazine suggests two interesting performance indicators. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish spoke about electoral turnout, making the good point that local authorities should not be burdened with having to deal with turnout. However, we have to give consideration to electoral registration because, over the past few years, many electoral registration officers have ignored their responsibility to produce an adequate register. My local electoral register contains duplications and the number of omissions runs into the thousands.

Even if this is not included as a performance indicator, local government should be given encouragement and, perhaps, financial assistance to improve electoral matters in the local area. Some of the issues relating to elections, such as having a rolling register or different voting days, do not fall within the scope of this or any other local government Bill, but we have to improve the turnout in local government elections because it is important that people should participate in local democracy.

I welcome the provisions in respect of a five-yearly review and benchmarking. If, at the end of the process, the benchmarking shows that a local authority is not achieving the level of the best and that leads to privatisation or some other means of providing a given service, so be it. I especially welcome the duty to review whether a given function should be exercised by an authority: it is high time local authorities were given a duty to examine the services they provide and to decide whether it is necessary that they provide those services, or whether they should be provided in some other way. Only by reviewing and comparing can we promulgate best practice.

I welcome the performance plans and agree that the public should be able to see what the local authority intends to provide and how it intends to do so. My local authority recently compiled the responses to a survey to which there was a good public response and which asked the public what services they thought the local authority provided. The local authority and I were devastated to learn that some members of the public still thought that the local authority was responsible for health care in their area. The results of that survey came as a big disappointment, showing that we have to educate the public about what services are available from local authorities and what a local authority is obliged to provide. If people are to understand why their council tax is being increased, decreased or capped, they have to understand the services on which that money is spent.

I welcome the provisions of clause 17, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) will speak at length on the subject. Matters such as terms and conditions of employment, training and recruitment, equal opportunities and the inclusion of people who are long-term unemployed should be permitted in contracts.

Clause 24 pre-empts future legislation in respect of the council tax subsidy and I hope that further thought will be given to the consultation on that. At the end of the day, we are removing capping with one hand and reintroducing a cruder version of capping with the other. As one who represents a deprived area, let me point out that it is the poorest authorities that will be hardest hit by council tax subsidy capping. I hope that Ministers will study closely the consultation responses on that subject.

6.26 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House, while welcoming the repeal of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1988 concerning compulsory competitive tendering, declines to give the Local Government Bill a Second Reading because, instead of creating a system of local government that is powerful and free, it grants comprehensive powers to the Secretary of State over local government, amounting to the nationalisation of local government, it creates a culture whereby local government is more concerned with the requirements of Whitehall than the needs of local residents, it retains and incrementally increases capping, thus blurring accountability for Council Tax and service levels, it fails to grant a power of general competence to local authorities, and it alters the way in which Council Tax Benefit subsidy is paid in such a way that poor Council Tax payers will pay for the benefits of the poorest Council Tax payers."

I shall address one of two of the points raised in the debate so far and then set out the Liberal Democrats' general view of the Bill. I listened with considerable interest to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett). In view of his comments on Henry VIII clauses, I hope that his application to be a member of the Standing Committee on the Bill is successful; such provisions cause us considerable concern and are an issue to which we should like to return at a later stage.

We share the view expressed by the hon. Gentleman and by several other hon. Members that it is right that the House should have regard for the way in which it has reduced the status of local government over many years—not only during the lifetime of the Conservative Government, but since the war. The process of attrition and centralisation, whereby powers and functions have been removed from local authorities and transferred to agencies and central Government Departments, has steadily undermined the authority of local authorities and their ability to command the support of local people. It is that, more than any other factor, that has depressed turnouts and the Liberal Democrats believe strongly that

there has to be a reversal of that centralising tendency. Unfortunately, the Bill does not in any way contribute to such a reversal.

Mr. Bennett: Although I fully accept that the powers exercised by local authorities have been substantially reduced, the hon. Gentleman should be careful with his argument: turnout figures have not fallen dramatically compared with the period when local authorities had a vast range of powers, for even then turnout was relatively low.

Mr. Burstow: I accept that. One analysis of last year's local election results commented that perhaps we had returned to a level of turnout more typical than that which pertained during the post-war period. There was a run of exceptionally high turnouts under the Conservative Government, when people increasingly used local elections to indicate their displeasure not only with Conservative local councillors, of whom there are now far fewer, but with Conservative central Government and the way in which they managed local government affairs through capping and other measures.

While we are on the subject of reversals, it was interesting to listen to the two Front-Bench speakers, especially the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin). He outlined the newly emerging Conservative policy on local government, which differs greatly from the policy paraded around the country when the Conservatives were in government. Many in local government, especially former Conservative councillors, would have liked to have heard those policies expressed and converted into action when the Conservatives were still in office, because they know only too well the consequences of the failure to do so. Many have told current Conservative Members of Parliament that the reason why the Conservative party no longer runs many local councils is the actions of the Conservative Government.

It is worth bearing in mind that, unlike the previous Government, the Labour Government have decided that it is appropriate for this country to sign up to and ratify the European charter of local self government. We welcome that sign of direction and of a desire to rejuvenate and reinvigorate local government. However, we question whether the Bill will move us in any way towards the noble sentiments and vision set out in the charter. It recognises the importance of independent and democratic local government and describes what local government is. It has tax-raising powers and it is not an agent of central Government. It is not there simply as a service delivery arm for central Government and Whitehall.

Given the Government's desire to sign up to that charter—soon after becoming a Minister the hon. Member for North-West Durham (Ms Armstrong) announced that they were signing up to it—it is surprising that this legislation does not cut central control or remove prescription of service delivery. It certainly does not devolve financial freedom to local authorities.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): On the contrary, the Bill would increase central control. The distinctiveness of local authorities that want to pursue their own agenda would be limited by bland, uniform targets and by "independent" audits, which would force them to adopt a vanilla-style approach and, therefore, would limit most electors' choice of different approaches and options.

Mr. Burstow: The extent to which the Bill would further extinguish the opportunity for diversity and distinctiveness at a local level is a cause for concern and I welcome the fact that Conservative Members are now increasingly concerned about those issues. It is a pity that they were not so concerned when they were in government.

The legislation assumes the worst of local councils. Labour did not take that position in opposition. The Minister referred to what she described as the Conservatives' approach of capping, compulsion and control, but it was a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Undoubtedly, the Bill contains many of those elements and nowhere is that more clear than in part I, which introduces the new regime of central control.

I must make it clear that Liberal Democrats welcome the end of compulsory—or compulsive—competitive tendering, which prevented and, indeed, perverted value for money. CCT resulted in local authorities being forced to deliver services on the basis of little more than trying to find the bargain basement price, not the highest-quality goods. We have always regarded that as an unacceptable product of the CCT regime. CCT did not bring the discipline of the private sector; it left councils tied up in red tape and bureaucracy, creating a huge industry for lawyers, consultants and all sorts of other agencies. Often, the so-called savings resulted from increasing staff insecurity and lowering wages.

The Liberal Democrats have never opposed the principle of private sector involvement in the provision of public services. Indeed, many of the authorities that we control are doing just that. However, we have always objected to the element of compulsion that CCT necessitates. The so-called best-value regime that is to replace CCT is in danger of being as hidebound in red tape and as knee deep in consultants as it ever was.

The Bill will grant the Secretary of State wide-ranging powers to guide and direct the new best-value regime. Indeed, a future Secretary of State armed with the new powers—perhaps a less benign Secretary of State—could reintroduce compulsory competitive tendering without the need for primary legislation. The Bill goes further than the wildest dreams—I stress that—of Nicholas Ridley and his view of how local government should evolve into annual meetings to let contracts. The wording of this Bill would allow a Secretary of State with a very different view from that of this Government to enable such changes without reference to Parliament, except to a Committee considering regulations that are not susceptible to amendment. That is why the Bill is unacceptable. The changes would not be subject to the sort of parliamentary scrutiny that I think appropriate. Indeed, my colleagues feel strongly that the scrutiny allowed is inappropriate.

Of course, competition remains an important element in the best-value regime. We do not object to that and it is important that competition and the ability to benchmark and to market test are appropriate. However, if a council knows from opinion polls, citizens' panels and other public consultation methods that go beyond sectoral interests, that a service is effective and popular with local residents, will it still have to subject that service to market

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testing under the regime? Many hon. Members have commented that the devil is in the detail. It is important that the regulations and guidance are available to the Standing Committee when it considers the Bill. Only in that context can we meaningfully scrutinise the legislation and debate where it will take us and local government.

Effective performance management is the key to high quality, cost-effective service delivery. Councils successfully deliver efficient services that are geared to the needs of their communities if they have built performance management into the organisation. There are different approaches to performance management. If one asked any three consultants, I am sure that they would offer different answers—for a price, of course.

Market testing and competition can help councils to achieve efficient service delivery, but the individual council and its electorate should be left to decide which services to market test, which to run in partnership with other organisations, whether in the private or the voluntary sector, and which should remain in-house. Indeed, it is important that local authorities should be able to retain an in-house capacity against which to benchmark and also to safeguard the public interest if a private contractor failed or where there was no other competitor in the local marketplace. Otherwise, we would have the bizarre situation of there being no facility in place for the service to be re-provided within the authority. That has been one of the down sides of the way in which CCT has operated.

The Bill is unacceptable to Liberal Democrats because it has such sweeping powers. I referred to the Henry VIII clause, clause 14, which would give the Secretary of State the power to rewrite other Acts of Parliament. The Bill as drafted would greatly extend the remit of the Audit Commission.

Ms Armstrong: Perhaps I can help. Clause 14 exists in its present form because we want to facilitate new ways of working. For example, we want to enable health authorities and local social services departments to pool budgets. Where appropriate, we want authorities to develop waste management programmes, not necessarily to separate collection and disposal, and that is impossible in two-tier authorities at the moment. We cannot do so in a way that will give local authorities flexibility to decide whether such a move is appropriate for them without doing so in that way.

If the hon. Gentleman persists in opposing those provisions, he will, for example, restrict the ability of authorities to work together. One authority that was a best-value pilot discovered that it organised only 10 adoptions last year. It has said that it is crazy for its social services department to offer a full adoption service and that it should be able to work with a neighbouring authority. The Bill would give authorities the freedom so to do. However, Parliament must be able to agree decisions to keep the public audit trail right.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I understand that the Minister is anxious to give the fullest possible explanation, but the Front-Bench spokesmen will have the opportunity to deal with such points when winding up.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful for that full explanation of the Government's intention behind the clause, but we must have regard for the fact that the Minister and the Secretary of State will not always be in those posts and that others could use the powers entirely differently. That is why we are expressing our concern and why we want to be clear about the procedures and the ability to amend. The Bill would allow alterations through regulations, when hon. Members would be allowed to vote yes or no, but they would not be allowed to consider, amend or change such regulations. That is a fundamental weakness of the Bill. A better way to secure what the Minister wants to achieve is to introduce a power of general competence. That would be in accordance with the representations made by the Local Government Association and—many times—by Liberal Democrats. We would support the Bill if it introduced that power and put in place a process by which Parliament would get what it needs but which also gave greater freedom to local government. Although we shall discuss the matter further in Committee, we object strongly to the Bill in principle because it does not offer that.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Is not the hon. Gentleman's criticism of the Bill in fact a criticism of the way in which the House works? The problem is that the House does not properly scrutinise Government. That is not the fault of the Government, who want to introduce sensible management into local government. It is for the House to modernise scrutiny of Bills and secondary legislation: if hon. Members addressed that matter more forcibly, we should make some progress.

Mr. Burstow: I could not agree more. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will vote with us when we press those very points. We firmly believe that many elements of the House's procedures could benefit from the modernising zeal about which Ministers often speak. Such modernisation would ensure that the House could scrutinise the Government's actions and legislative proposals more effectively than at present.

The Bill greatly extends the remit of the Audit Commission. I strongly support that organisation's work and the non-partisan and effective manner in which it operates, but the Bill could add a new dimension to the conflict that can arise between local councillors and auditors. That is because, when assessing best-value plans, it is possible that auditors will go further than a review of the process involved in assembling such plans and will stray into challenging directly local authorities' policy priorities.

As the Bill is drafted, it appears that the Audit Commission may have to issue guidance and give support to local authorities. It will be interesting to learn how much extra Ministers think that local authorities will have to pay in fees for such additional services.

Reference has been made already to the 100 or more local authorities, under the control of all parties, that are engaged in best-value pilot schemes testing the practical effect of the ideas contained in the Bill. How will the lessons from those pilot schemes be translated into the provisions of the Bill and the regulations and guidance to be issued subsequently? I hope that the Minister will give some indication of the timetable and the process involved. When will the information derived from the best-value pilot schemes be shared with the House?

Questions also arise with regard to the duty to implement best value and the drafting of clause 3, which omits any mention of equality or environmental

sustainability. We are especially worried that the Bill does not refer to either of those matters, and we shall press Ministers on them in Committee, as we believe that they are important and must be given due regard in the application of the best-value regime.

I turn now to capping, whose scope the Bill in fact extends because it allows a more sophisticated selection of authorities that may be capped. We have consistently opposed the principle of capping, as we believe that it blurs accountability. Council tax payers faced with higher bills or poor quality services will not know to whom they should complain. Should they express their unhappiness in writing to Ministers or to local councillors at their surgeries, or should they boot out those councillors at the next local election?

As has been said already, the new regime will introduce more secrecy into the process. It will be harder for treasurers and councillors to make judgments in advance of capping to protect their local authorities' interests when it comes to setting budget requirements and council tax levels. The absence of pre-signalling will be damaging. In the interests of local democracy and of genuine local accountability through the ballot box, we should prefer capping to be abandoned altogether.

The Bill paves the way for the introduction of the council tax benefit subsidy limitation. The previous Conservative Government introduced a housing benefit subsidy limitation, and this Government are to employ the same claw-back mechanism for council tax benefit. Even though some Labour Members are continuing their campaign for changes in what they believe to be an unfair housing benefit regime, they are likely to support the introduction of the same unfairness into the council tax benefit system.

We believe that the proposal will penalise councils that spend slightly more than what is dictated by central Government. The Local Government Association has calculated that there are at least 23 local authorities in England which, even if their spending levels match those of the Government's standard spending assessments, will be penalised by having council tax benefit subsidy clawed back. That seems even more unfair in the light of what the Minister said earlier about achieving a balance between the interests of taxpayers at national and local levels. How can it be fair for central Government, by means of the new device contained in the Bill, to claw back benefit paid to support services at the level that central Government will have deemed appropriate? The Government must examine closely the details of the scheme, which clearly will penalise some of the poorest councils and people in the country.

The Bill will restore, by the back door, the system of crude capping. It will amount to another way in which the Government will be able crudely to direct local authorities in the conduct of their affairs, and we shall oppose the measure for that reason. As our reasoned amendment makes clear, we believe that the provision is inappropriate.

What is the reason for the haste behind the introduction of the council tax benefit limitation? In the coming financial year, even though they may not be pre-signalling, the Government will continue to implement the existing regime of crude and universal capping. So why are they hurrying to rush through Parliament this Bill and its associated regulations to enable them to impose this additional central control over local authorities? What is the rush? The scheme has been announced, but local authority associations and treasurers have not yet seen the scheme's precise details. That makes it much more difficult for treasurers to advise local authority members about setting appropriate budgets.

The Bill fails to put in place the building blocks needed for the reinvigoration of local government. It does nothing to tackle the democratic deficit caused by the domination of one-party councils as a result of the first-past-the-post electoral system. [HON. MEMBERS: "Here we go."] Hon. Members may say, "Here we go," but they would have been even more surprised had I not made some reference to a voting system that causes too many councils to be complacent about the views of their electorates because they know that they will not be tipped out of office. The present system reinforces one-party domination of councils.

The Bill does nothing to introduce the wider power of general competence to which I referred earlier, nor does it increase local financial autonomy by returning control of the business rate to local councils.

Mrs. Gorman: Does the hon. Gentleman care to remember why the business rate was reorganised? It was because, rather than increasing the domestic rates, local authorities—largely Labour councils—were milking the business community. They often doubled and sometimes trebled the business rate year by year. The Government had to introduce measures to protect the business community. Incidentally, many areas with poorer populations benefited from the redistribution of the business rate from councils such as Westminster, which provided a very large part of the money.

Mr. Burstow: There are two or three points there. First, the introduction of the uniform business rate has done considerable harm to the interests of small businesses in many areas. That remains a concern of the various organisations that represent small businesses. Secondly, research that was published even during the passage of the legislation to introduce the uniform business rate showed that there was little evidence of the adverse effects on businesses that were claimed to be the result of the level of the business rate. Thirdly, the Government suggested in the Green Paper ways in which there could be linkage between business rates and the council tax so that councils could not shift the burden unfairly onto the business rates, as the hon. Lady claims that they used to do.

For all those reasons, we do not accept the hon. Lady's argument. We hold to our view that the business rates should be returned to local control. That would make for a more buoyant local tax base and a fairer distribution of funding between that which is raised centrally and that which is raised locally. That is the first step back to greater financial independence for local authorities and more accountability to their local communities. That is why we strongly commend the idea to the House again today.

Best value and sophisticated capping are the products of pre-election promises made by the Labour party. Capping and compulsory competitive tendering are now effectively to be changed, but they are not to be brought to an end. The Bill strengthens ministerial control and further weakens local accountability. The Bill fails to strengthen local accountability. It is prescriptive. It turns councils into service delivery arms of Whitehall.

[Mr. Burstow]

The Minister said in her concluding remarks that the Bill put local people in the driving seat. In our view, it does not put local people or local councils in the driving seat. Rather, it puts the Secretary of State in the driving seat. Indeed, the Secretary of State, through the Bill, is highjacking more powers from local authorities. He is leaving councillors and citizens on the hard shoulder.

6.53 pm

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): Like many other hon. Members who are contributing to the debate, I used to be a councillor. I served for six years on a metropolitan district council in the west midlands. As people know, metropolitan district councils have an obligation to deliver many services. My party was in control for four of those six years and in opposition for two. We were put into opposition by a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. We hear a lot of talk these days about coalitions with the Liberal Democrats. I thought that the House might like to know that coalitions can be fairly flexible. I have watched closely local Liberal Democrats and Conservatives in power and they have an interesting interpretation of democracy and accountability. I will leave it at that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) eloquently summed up all the disadvantages of compulsory competitive tendering and what was wrong with it. It is certainly high time that it was got rid of. There is one disadvantage that no one has pointed out and that I would like to throw into the pot.

In the six years that I was a councillor, I was able to watch at first hand the implementation of white-collar CCT. One of its major effects was to set departments against departments, officers against officers and members against members. An enormous blame culture got going in the local authority. That was not peculiar to my authority; it happened in local authorities across the land. The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) said that CCT led to joined-up local government. It did nothing of the sort. It achieved the opposite. That is one of the biggest reasons why it is about time that it was gone.

Earlier this morning, I was fortunate enough to listen to a couple of representatives from local councils that have been best value pilots. They said that one of the advantages of best value was that it encouraged inter-departmental working. Members and officers had to work much more closely together to ensure that they met local needs and delivered the services that people wanted. I am willing to keep an open mind on best value. If it achieves a better working culture within most councils, it will be something to be welcomed.

However, I have two major reservations about the Bill. The first is about the standards and performance indicators for best value. If I read the Bill correctly, it does not contain any mechanism for asking councils what performance indicators they would like. My hon. Friends on the Front Bench will have to allow councils to shape the standards against which they are to be judged. Not all councils are the same. Populations have different needs. We will need to build in some flexibility and allow councils to have a say about how their performance is measured. I have a fair degree of scepticism about leaving it to central Government Departments to set the performance indicators. If we do that, we shall simply replace prescriptive, top-down CCT with prescriptive, top-down best value.

When we won the general election, most councils thought that the days of edicts handed down from central Government Departments and of being told, "This is the way you are going to do it—like it or lump it," had gone. I urge my hon. Friends the Ministers to consider ways in which councils can be consulted in setting the performance indicators.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): I think that my hon. Friend misunderstands the intention of the Bill. Yes, targets will be set nationally. It is important that local authorities can be compared easily against the same standards, but local authorities will be required to devise their own performance indicators as well.

Ms Jones: If I have misunderstood the Bill, I stand corrected, but the Bill is in its early stages. I shall monitor its progress closely as it goes through Committee, into the other House, and comes back again. I need reassuring on that point.

My second reservation is about capping. Universal capping is going, and I am pleased about that. It was a crude instrument—a sledgehammer of an instrument. It was anti-local democracy. However, the Bill should spell out what the Secretary of State's reserve powers are, what will trigger them and how they will be implemented. We hear a lot about transparency and accountability, but councils also need transparency. They need to know not only where but what the goalposts are. They need to know what they are aiming at. The Bill is not clear about what the reserve powers are and what will trigger them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) was right about accountability. I was always led to believe that the ballot box was the ultimate accountability. My former council, like many others, has elections every three years out of four. It may be worth while the House remembering the reason why we do not have elections in the fourth year. In the 1980s, the Conservative Government's relationship with local authorities got so bad that they abolished a tier of local government because they did not like the fact that councils insisted on thinking for themselves.

Many councils have annual elections. As an ex-councillor, I assure the House that nothing concentrates one's mind more than the knowledge that one must go to the electorate each year to discover whether the people like what one has done. We should not get too carried away with rhetoric about the unaccountability of councils. I think that they know more about accountability than do some central Government departments or regional offices of Government.

For more than 100 years, most councils have delivered services to the best of their ability. Many councils and councillors work extremely hard. Earlier in the debate, the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) read out the usual list of councils that have not been as competent as they should. However, to be honest, they are in the minority. I believe that councils—whatever their political control—and councillors work extremely hard to deliver the services that they think the electors want. For many years, they have done so in a very hostile climate.

Most councils now want a much more positive working relationship with central Government. They want to see a partnership. We hear an awful lot about that these days, but I think that councils want a genuine partnership between local and central Government. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench not to forget that as the Bill moves through Parliament. We must not let down the councils when they are seeking a new way of working with central Government.

7.2 pm

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): I agree with the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) that local government in Britain today is in the grip of a malaise. With great respect to my very good friend, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), I do not share his apparent complacency about the situation. He may have been a better colonial governor than the present one, but the empire simply must be dismantled.

The reason for the malaise is a fundamental ambiguity in our understanding in Britain of the basis of local authority. That ambiguity is increasingly disabling, and I suggest to the Government and to my party that it must be resolved—not least because, until it is, the constitutional reconstruction which is under way, and which I think everyone now accepts is irreversible, will not be complete. The ambiguity to which I refer goes back a long way and is neatly encapsulated in the title of an academic book on mediaeval English local government: "Self-Government by the King's Command". In other words, local communities must govern themselves but their authority comes from the top downwards and not from local communities upwards. The Minister paid lip service to the idea of self-governing local communities, but her answer to my intervention about my county of Oxfordshire demonstrated that she is as much trapped in this ambiguity as any one of her predecessors.

To understand the problem that we face, we must first understand the three great forces that have reinforced the top-down nature of our system of local government over the past century. Those forces have operated under Governments of all three parties.

The first force is the increasing cost of the widening range of services provided by the state. In 1900, local government spent roughly half of total Government spending of £19 billion—that is the figure in today's money; in 1900, it was only £272 million. About half of that amount was raised in local taxation—that is to say, local government raised one quarter of all public spending. Today, at the end of the century, Government spending amounts to some £333 billion, of which local revenues yield no more than one sixteenth.

The second force making for centralisation is the idea that government services must operate to uniform national standards and by nationally standardised procedures. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow)—who is just leaving the Chamber—referred to the history of this question. He might like to note that the first big step towards centralisation was taken by a Liberal Government in 1906—admittedly a long time ago—with a national system of labour exchanges run by Whitehall. The next great step came after 1945 when the Labour Government decided to create a national health service rather than allocating new duties to the existing system of local government. That was a fateful step, which created a system of local administration parallel to local government but with different boundaries and without the benefit of local election. Since 1945, such parallel systems have been elaborated in a host of new areas almost exclusively by transfers out of local government and hardly at all by transfers downward from central Government. As result, nowadays more people appointed by Ministers are holding office in local bodies than are elected by local people.

I think it is fair to describe this as an obsession with national uniformity. One of the most disastrous consequences of that obsession is the fact that the perfectly proper principle of equity between different regions of the country has been used to justify a set of mechanisms that has reduced local financial discretion to the almost marginal. The Bill continues that mistaken approach. In the name of equity, business taxation has been centralised and all local spending, including the capping regime, is determined by formulae devised in Whitehall. If the gentleman in Whitehall does not know best, it is only because his computer knows better.

The third great force making for centralisation is concern for efficiency. The Minister laid great stress on that in her speech today. Especially under the previous Conservative Government, local government was distrusted as it was seen to be too liable to producer capture and political manipulation. I sense that that distrust persists in the Bill and its concept of best value. Over the past 20 years, a raft of functions has been transferred from local government to the new parallel structures in the fields of housing, education, career services, waste regulation, the provision of homes for the elderly, highways and so on.

Anyone who thinks that the rejection of local government was an exclusively Conservative phenomenon has only to look at the policies followed by new Labour since 1997 in relation to youth crime, community safety, raising educational standards and the provision of social care. As Harold Wilson once said, "Whoever is in office, the Whigs of Whitehall are always in power."

National performance standards, cost control, equity and efficiency are important and legitimate concerns. They represent important principles that deserve to be respected. The problem is that, in this country, they have been pursued beyond reasonable measure and without regard to countervailing considerations. This Bill is no exception. One might say that those principles are the typical product of a polity that has dispensed with the concept of checks and balances.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I am fascinated by the hon. Gentleman's contribution and by several speeches by Opposition Members in which they have reinvented themselves before our very eyes. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that he is able to condemn this country for being more centralised than our neighbours because other western countries have varying degrees of devolution to regional bodies? I do not recall the hon. Gentleman's supporting our devolution proposals.

Mr. Jackson: Governments of all parties share responsibility for the current situation. That is the spirit in which I make my remarks. I want to outline the dangers of the situation that we are in and to explain what we should do about it.

[Mr. Jackson]

The fact is that the slogan of equity and efficiency could lead us to do away altogether with elected local government. It could even justify our doing away with elected national government. A body such as the European Commission—if I dare to mention it—could undoubtedly run this country with adequate equity and efficiency if they were the only values that mattered. We have to recognise that what is at stake includes the principle of representative government and the idea of accountability to elected people. In our treatment of local government over the years, our position in the House reminds me of the proverbial cartoon character who is depicted busily sawing off the branch on which he is sitting.

To my party in particular, I want to make a particular point. In the late 1980s, we were drifting towards the idea that, at the local level, accountability towards elected representatives could be replaced by accountability to the users of public services through the operation of internal markets. There are still those who find that a seductive vision: every school grant maintained; every doctor a fundholder; every public service run by people engaged on a fixed-term contract by a Minister applying transparent performance standards constructed on the basis of surveys of user preferences.

The problem is that we have no warrant from experience that practice matches that beautiful theory, in which politics is reduced to a subdivision of marketing and citizens are regarded essentially as consumers. How much power do users have in relation to monopolistic public services dispensing scarce goods? Can "Exit" replace "Voice" in those services? How does the fragmentation that the theory entails enable us to deal with the many problems that are best tackled on an integrated multi-service basis? Are we not coming to recognise that the world of opinion polls and focus groups is dangerously open to manipulation by the power holders? Can accountability in the detail that matters to users be ensured through fixed-term contracts? We should always remember that the American authors of "Reinventing Government" framed their ideas against the background of the highly developed and constitutionally guaranteed system of representative local government that we in this country lack.

I point out, in answer to the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), that the British system—or perhaps, after devolution, we should now refer to the English system—has become excessively dependent on a single instrument: the accountability of Ministers to Parliament. All Members of the House know that instrument to be a broken reed. As the question of what we are doing to improve our procedures has been raised, let me point out that the Modernisation Committee is doing nothing about that.

My conclusion is that we all need to go back to fundamentals in local government. I welcome the recognition of that, although it was derided by Labour Members, by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who spoke from the Front Bench. The fundamental question that needs to be resolved is whether local government is to be an expression of local self-government or no more than one way among others of delivering services. Another fundamental question follows: how far can we and should we do without the representative principle?

If we study the deep-rooted political traditions of this country, we know the answers to those questions. On those fundamental matters there is common ground between the Tory tradition of limited government and pluralism of powers and the radical liberal tradition of democratic citizenship. The only political tradition that sustains our present approach is that of the old-fashioned socialist top-down bureaucratic planning of which Whitehall is now the last exponent in the civilised world.

Once we have answered those basic questions, all the other questions of equity and efficiency, difficult as they are, can be more easily answered. The answer lies in finding a balance between what they require and what local choice, diversity and pluralism require. The key issue is encapsulated in the figure that I gave earlier—locally raised revenues now amount to no more than a sixteenth of total public spending. No other advanced country works in that way. Let us look to other countries, recognising that, if they can make subsidiarity work, so can we.

The Bill does not address the fundamentals that have made us one of the most over-centralised and least accountable polities in the western world. That is a task for a future Conservative Administration, which I hope will devote to our national political life the same radical energies that the previous Conservative Administration devoted to our national economic life.

7.14 pm

Mrs. Christine Butler (Castle Point): I enormously enjoyed the speech by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who performed a volte face by largely supporting the Bill, gave a litany of disclaimers for his party and made accusations against Labour-controlled local councils. Although he is not in his place, I shall enlighten him about what his party used to get up to in local government. I have direct experience of that because when Castle Point suffered under a Conservative administration, one of its members was well known for boasting that no one could teach him very much about corruption and it would take a majority of freemasons for the council to make any decision.

I was delighted to listen to the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), who gave wonderful descriptions of authorities in the great days of Victorian municipal authorities before the first world war. I am afraid that the world has moved on since then, although he rightly pointed out that, in most respects, people have not changed much in their attitudes to local or any other government.

I welcome the establishment of the best value regime that will replace the outdated, inadequate and unpopular compulsory competitive tendering system. I welcome also an end to crude and universal capping.

Some hon. Members have read too much into the Bill before us; it is not the definitive, all-purpose local government Bill. More is to come, and it would be appropriate to discuss at a later stage some of the matters that have been mooted this evening.

The Bill has a simple message: best value replacing CCT; a regulatory regime that will enhance local government performance; and the Secretary of State

taking a bottom-line approach by using reserve powers to police local government measures. I share other hon. Members' reservations about those latter aspects.

The principle of best value has been endorsed by stakeholders across a spectrum of national bodies including local government. From my experience, I know that members of the public appreciate, understand and welcome best value. The principle of best value in local service provision and the necessary consultation provided for in the Bill will increase public confidence in local government. More specifically, the Bill heralds a new and meaningful approach to participatory democracy through greater accountability, transparency and consultation. We must, however, be careful that the principle remains whole and clear in legislation and will shine through in the practical implementation at local level.

I should like the Government to make a commitment to a national scheme to give support and advice to local authorities that are developing best value. Despite the expected benefits that may cascade from the example of beacon authorities, sufficient evidence exists of a need for a resource to help to develop skills, particularly in researching supply markets, in procurement and in restructuring councils. Although I would have liked schools to have been included, and a single standards inspectorate to be established, I welcome the proposed inspectorate forum, which will at least create a coherent framework for inspection.

Although I welcome the proposed guidance in particular areas that the Secretary of State will give local authorities, we need more flesh on those bones. As the Bill progresses, I hope that there will be a clearer indication of which performance indicators will be used for the objectives of cost, quality outcome and public expectation. I hope, too, for greater clarification of the principles that will determine excessiveness.

7.20 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Like the hon. Member for Castle Point (Mrs. Butler), I come from a background of local government. It is interesting that so many hon. Members who have spoken do so too. As a result, the House has seen through the sugar coating on the Bill's bitter pill. The first portion of the Bill, which plays to the Labour unions, especially in local government, is the sugar coating. It placates those in the unions, and Liberal Democrat and Labour councillors, whose concerns about compulsory competitive tendering have been expressed in the debate. Such concern neglects to see CCT in the light of the times in which it was originally introduced.

The second portion of the Bill is the bitter part: blatant capping. There is no doubt about that. The hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) said that the Bill takes away capping with one hand and puts it back with the other. That is not so. It removes capping with one hand, but puts it back with both. There are two forms of capping in the Bill: subjective capping in the main part of the Bill and a crude, across-the-board capping in the schedules.

As far as Labour councillors are concerned, this is the best value Bill. The words "best value" sound nice. I imagine that they roll easily off the tongues of spin doctors. The concept sounds easy to sign up to. It even sounds as though it might benefit somebody. However, as has been spelt out time and again, there is not enough in the Bill on which to grip in order that hon. Members may decide whether best value will work.

We have a White Paper, a vague Bill, regulations to come, discussions, and so on. Member after Member has asked for clarification. As discussions are continuing, perhaps the Government might seriously consider, for the benefit of people in local government and of hon. Members on both sides of the House, delaying a little the Bill's consideration in Committee until more information and clarity is provided. The touch of good will for the Bill is being destroyed by the lack of information and understanding. Many of us are concerned that residents in central areas, which are generally run by the Labour party, will receive worse, not better services.

Competitive tendering, which is common practice in the business world and in many western countries, has become political in this country. It was introduced to try to create decent local government services; to try to get local government to understand its services, set standards in them and provide fair value.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Does the hon. Gentleman consider that the previous Government achieved best value, given that an Equal Opportunities Commission report found that compulsory competitive tendering cost more than £250 million—twice the savings that it purported to achieve? I do not think that that is best value. Is the hon. Gentleman's concept of best value the same as the one that we are discussing?

Sir Paul Beresford: The hon. Lady should look at the most recent independent report on a large number of local authorities, which describes their opinion of CCT. Instead of going through the long report, I shall quote the summary, which concludes that most authorities

"have achieved significant cost savings in addition to those previously obtained. At the same time, most Authorities believe that the quality of service provision has improved."

That is clearly an independent report. From my experience, the hon. Lady's supposition is wrong. Even *The Times*—quite some time ago, I admit—praised in an editorial the benefits to local people in quality of service and value for money from CCT.

The Government have done a few correct things in the Bill. They have built on the previous Government's ideas concerning the Audit Commission and the district auditor, the three Es—economy, efficiency and effectiveness—and the citizens charter approach, to which blatant reference is made.

I am concerned that such good things will be destroyed by the apathy of which the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) spoke, as a result of the Labour party's idea of consultation, which I understand and, to a degree, support. Although consultation is laudable, it is set up in such a way in the Bill that it could end up providing a cover. People may be persuaded of the quality of services, which could and should be better, by the reviews, discussion and documents poured on them.

There is talk of competition yet, under the Bill, authorities will be able completely to cut out competition with the private sector—either directly or indirectly. Without doubt, that will lead to a diminution in service quality and an increase in costs. It saddens me that, as a result, inner cities will be hurt most.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish talked about apathy in voting. I suspect that we are doomed to find the same in the consultation exercises as they are set out in

[Sir Paul Beresford]

the Bill. Let us consider the example of a London council. As a best value authority, it will be required to consult residents, service users, tenants groups, residents groups, businesses, neighbouring councils and probably the Government office for London, diocesan boards, health authorities, public utility companies, the Department of Social Security, some professional groups, and so on. The list could—and if there is a cover-up, will—go further. The beleaguered residents of that London borough will be consulted by the borough, the police, the fire and civil defence authority, the development agency, the waste authority, Transport for London, the mayor of London and the Greater London Authority. All that is just on the duties.

Next, each local authority will have to prepare a best value performance plan for each financial year. Each plan will be published before the following financial year, and, hence, will be based on the data of the previous financial year. Thus, it will be 18 months to two years out of date. For the plans to be useful, they must be voluminous and impenetrable—utterly beyond the ordinary resident. That will be a turn-off. The Denton and Reddish apathy will strike. There will be genuine interest in some aspects of services among businesses and directly linked organisations—perhaps among others, too. However, the process will create such apathy that the ordinary resident will be most unlikely to respond. The odd resident will respond to everything, but, from my experience, with some exceptions, emphasis should be on the word "odd".

Ministers assure us that the district auditor will be closely involved. I hope that they will ensure that we are not contemplating a new bureaucratic superstructure, which will be set up by the auditor and chargeable to the council tax payer. It must not be allowed to become a gravy train. If the Minister wants any advice, he should suck in his pride and speak to Westminster council.

As has been said, compulsory competitive tendering is to go. The White Paper tells us that it will still be available as an option, but because the element of compulsion will be lost and the rules will be changed, local authorities will be able to fiddle the tendering while making a show of putting out for private competition.

The loss of quality and value for money will be covered by reviews and excuses. That is the reason for clause 17. It is a sop to the left. The removal of non-commercial considerations from competition for best value for money will mean that some local authorities will try to beat the system. They will turn competitive tendering into a farce and will stack the odds against the private sector so that there will be no real competition.

I seek a categorical assurance from the Minister that it will not be possible to use clauses 14 and 15 to allow a local authority partly or wholly to own a company that is set up for municipal trading. As the Bill is currently drafted—and because we have been provided with so little detail—that seems possible. It would be deplorable if public companies—by which I mean publicly owned companies, in the form of local authority companies—could compete against the same private companies that pay the council's business rates and whose workers pay the authority's council tax.

I suspect that the Government hope that many Back Benchers will focus on the sweet first half of the Bill and not notice the second half. It has been fairly evident this evening that at least some of them have noticed the difference. The Secretary of State told us that crude across-the-board capping had gone. He had the wit to say that he had replaced it with another form of capping—a subjective form. The present proposals go further, introducing a subjective form in the Bill itself and crude universal capping in the schedules to it.

To add to the woes of local government, as we have heard, the Secretary of State will for the first time be able to set a cap at a level below authorities' standard spending assessment. I hope that some Government Back Benchers have thought about that. I shall watch with interest the reaction to the Bill of hon. Members representing constituencies in Labour-controlled Brent, because as matters stand, that local authority will make itself heard loudly.

The main part of the Bill will not bring best value in services to council residents throughout the country. The control is vague, bureaucratic, distant and in many cases will be based on data that are horribly out of date. In summary, I do not believe that the Bill will work as well as one might wish. It will be a poor substitute for CCT. The capping proposals take little account of changes in circumstances. We will hear more about that in time to come from Labour Back Benchers as well as from the Opposition. The proposals allow for unfair, subjective application, and for the first time they allow capping below SSA.

7.34 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): It must be wonderful to be a born-again shadow Local Government Minister. One can repudiate everything that the previous Government did as a result of the application of a particular ideology, while at the same time defending that ideology and skipping easily over the evident contradiction between the two positions.

I shall deal with the solution to that contradiction—the release from the ideological impasse in which the previous Government placed local government—by looking at best value as a way forward. Best value is defined in clause 3 as securing continuous improvement in the exercise of all functions undertaken by an authority, whether statutory or not,

"having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness."

It should be noted that the definition calls for continuous improvement in all functions. Account must be taken of the three Es—economy, efficiency and effectiveness—but it is essentially improvement in the round. My personal view is that we might add a fourth E—equity—to make it crystal clear that our intention is to secure improvement in the round.

The Bill makes it clear that improvement must be judged by a variety of factors. To what extent does the community accept that there will be improvement? Is there improvement in allocative efficiency—that is, the best overall outcome of service delivery—or is it simply a cheaper service for a cheaper specification, as we previously experienced?

It is interesting that the Opposition make a great point of the fact that best value is not obsessively defined in the Bill, as CCT was under the previous regime. That is the point. The idea of a partnership with local government, and of the community being able to judge the outcome

and suggest how a particular service trajectory may go means that everything should not be obsessively laid down, because flexibility is needed at local level.

The Bill presents a challenge for local authorities. In some ways the process of conforming to the requirements of CCT was straightforward, if painful, for local government. All that local authorities had to do was to carry out the letter of the legislation. They might want their in-house team to win and they might do their best to make that happen, but the opening of the brown envelope was a neat cut-off point to all those concerns. Failure to win was the fault of the brown envelope. The authorities' job thereafter was to adapt to reality after the envelope. Their creative urges could be channelled into methods of subverting the process, but little else.

Best value, however, challenges local authorities to forge a relationship with their service providers over a long period. The service providers may be the in-house team, an external provider or a voluntary sector organisation that does not operate for profit. The duty that best value places on a local authority is to work on service provision together.

The work of preparing and allocating contracts has a direct bearing on what happens afterwards and over a long period, because there is no brown envelope cut-off point. The local authority must be responsible for the consequences of its own decision making prior to allocating the contracts. That gives local authorities the opportunity to think carefully about the best combination of provision for the local community. The Bill states—in clause 6, I think—that communities should be involved in deciding and evaluating, making that process an important part of the overall success of best value.

That is a great step forward from the narrow focus of CCT, which was almost exclusively targeted on the idea that the market rules, that there was no such thing as a public service ethos, and that the only benefit that communities wanted was to pay less for fewer services. The claim for CCT was that the market would inevitably deliver a better service at a cheaper cost, if only it were allowed to.

At the beginning of my contribution I referred to the deep ideological nature of CCT. It was an ideological instrument derived directly from that snake-oil doctor of the far right, F. A. von Hayek, who took the extreme view that the pricing mechanism would solve every problem in the market, if only it could be left to its own devices. The claim for CCT was along the lines that von Hayek suggested: provided every impediment to the operation of the market could be removed, service improvements would automatically follow. In reality, that has not happened. Overall, there is little evidence that CCT has worked in the way in which its framers originally claimed that it would. It is interesting that the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) should claim overall headline savings of 6 per cent. on CCT costs. I imagine that he took that figure from the executive summary of the Walsh and Davis study of 1993. But if one reads the report as a whole, the reality, even in that report, is rather different.

There is evidence that savings, where they have occurred—Walsh and Davis make this clear—have largely been through savings in specifications, driving down conditions of service, or in labour casualisation, all of which have an effect on the quality of service offered. It is no accident that the previous Government systematically resisted the application of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 to CCT contracts. An acceptance of their terms would have largely removed that hidden saving mechanism for external contractors. The evidence from many contractors is that they specifically bid for contracts because they knew that they could cut corners and costs over and above the contract terms in order to make a profit from a competitive bid.

There is some evidence of the discipline of CCT developing more service-oriented approaches by direct labour organisations, but, with hindsight, it is not clear that other developments in local government could not have achieved that outcome.

Set against that is the real evidence of the cost of preparing and policing tenders—the so-called transactional costs. Again, Walsh and Davis estimated those to be some 7 per cent. of each contract each year, but there is also evidence that savings vanish once a service is re-tendered after four years. Studies more recent than that by Walsh and Davis suggest that at the second round of tenders, especially if the local authority in-house team has been knocked out in the first round, savings start to disappear as costs rise and as cartels start to organise the service among themselves.

Evidence of the cost of monitoring the service suggests that the client side, where a strict comparison can be made, has a 30 per cent. or similar increase in its cost compared with the cost of servicing contracts prior to CCT.

Also present, but less easy to evaluate, is evidence of the breach in the perception of the local council—perhaps the most important although the least tangible point—as providing a responsive service to the community; the loss of the ability to amend and adjust to suit local needs. If a contract did not specify a service at the time of allocation, that was it. Local authorities simply told one to come back when the service was re-tendered.

There is the story of the ducks—sometimes described as the Barnet ducks, although I may be doing that authority a disservice—which allegedly died during the winter because whereas the park keeper had once fed them informally, the new contractor had not received a specification requiring him to do so. That may be a little apocryphal, but it illustrates the widespread problems that contracted services posed to the good relationship that should exist between a council and the community that it serves.

That will change with best value. Local authorities must be efficient, but they must also be able to talk about efficiency in the common-sense way in which most people refer to it—what is the best overall outcome taking into account the combination of factors that affect it. Of course, best value needs to be monitored and measured. The public have a right to expect the best from their local authorities, and they need tools to find out whether that is the case. I do not accept that the public will not be able to take part in decisions on local plans or to judge a local authority's service provision on the basis of what it said it would do. In principle, that is a fairly easy concept for local people to grasp, and I am sure that they will.

The Bill provides for a continuing involvement of the Audit Commission in that task. It will be a more complex task, since the mechanical measurement of performance will no longer suffice. For example, Postman Pat effectively served the community of Greendale by

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

delivering medicines, pulling sheep out of hedges, alerting the emergency services when people were in distress, and so on. But he carried a cat in his post van, and under CCT he would have been sacked on the spot for inefficiency in delivering the post. Under CCT, the post may simply have been collected from the office in the centre of Greendale and there would not have been a Postman Pat at all.

Mr. Bennett: E-mail.

Dr. Whitehead: Even e-mail.

The Audit Commission will need to measure in the round and produce indicators that reflect that. Therefore, it will need to consider community health. It will have to ask whether the community is working better as a result of the way in which services are delivered. I am delighted that some measures will be set in terms of delivery against community expectation. To measure that is a further challenge. It will produce a different way of organising performance indicators from the mechanistic approach of the previous Conservative Government. The Government will need to ensure that those more difficult three-dimensional performance indicators are robust. I am sure that work will be needed to ensure that that is the case.

We will need to ensure that those technical measurements and the consequences of the removal of crude capping work well, and that is a matter for detailed consideration in Committee. However, I welcome the Bill on Second Reading. It demonstrates that the Government are willing to enter into a partnership with local government where the proper roles and responsibilities of each are understood. That is a great achievement compared with the trench warfare of centralism—which I know from my own experience—which the previous Government decided was the lot of local government in the United Kingdom.

7.46 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) invited us to go back to fundamentals in considering the Bill—what we want from local authorities is the context in which the Bill is being debated. Before doing so, I want to deal briefly with some comments made by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead).

Essentially, the misunderstanding in the hon. Gentleman's contribution was that he failed to recognise that CCT was based on an analysis of process, not outcome. The worry that some of us who value local democracy have about best value is that not just the process but the outcome will be defined, not by the local people, because the accountability will not be first and foremost to them, the recipients of the service—although I accept that consumers and electors are not synonymous—but by an outside agency, in this case the Government. That is the essential difference between CCT and best value. It is a difference and a concern which has been raised by the Local Government Association.

I come now, in the spirit initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), to the fundamentals. We need to see the Bill in the context of our vision of local democracy. Local government is a key part of our democratic infrastructure, but only if it is in the tradition of local self-government, not if it is an agency for central Government. That may seem self-evident. Surely we all recognise that local government is important democratically in a number of ways. It is important because it is the first interface which most people have with the exercise of political power. It is important because it helps to provide the framework of our political parties which, in a sophisticated democracy, are themselves crucial to good government. But it is also important because it provides an alternative means of delivering political ideas, of exercising political power; not a competitive means to this place—this Parliament is sovereign—but an alternative means, an alternative forum for different ideas, a different focus for power, a different focus for a distinctive view of how services should be delivered in a local community.

Sadly, although that may seem self-evident, it has not been a view shared by many national politicians since the war. It is easy to forget that before 1945 core services, such as electricity, health and water, were delivered by local government. The drift has been one way since then, and it has been away from local democracy and local government. Politicians of Governments of all parties have failed to trust local government with the power that it needs to deliver the sort of distinctive exercise of political authority that I mentioned earlier.

The tradition of people making a national name in local government before entering Parliament has also largely been lost in this country, although it still exists in many other democracies—France springs to mind. I say that it is lost because it was once the norm here. One thinks of the Chamberlains in Birmingham or Herbert Morrison in London, who became national figures in local government before they made their names in Parliament. That, loss, too, has had an effect on the way this place sees local democracy. If we accept my initial premise—that local government is an essential part of our democratic infrastructure—we must have the courage to allow local authorities sufficient power and finance to govern not only effectively, but distinctively.

There must be sufficient flexibility to allow innovation and diversity in different authorities. Audited performance plans and unprecedented levels of intervention by the Secretary of State raise legitimate doubts about the creation of vanilla-flavoured local government, constrained by a combination of rigid finance and uniform standards dictated from outside the locality. That will endanger the concept of genuine choices being made locally about the distinctive exercise of political authority. Such intervention is based on the bogus notion of equity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage pointed out, but also on the equally bogus notion of comparability.

The idea that there can be any useful purpose in having nationally uniform targets to compare local authorities in urban areas with small authorities in remote rural communities is nonsense. There is no good logical reason for uniform targets across such different types of local authority. It is as nonsensical as having uniform targets for different types of business; for example, by comparing a farmer with a person making soft drinks. It is a bogus notion, but a powerful one, and it is reflected both in the Bill and in the explanatory notes.

Annual performance plans across authorities must be different in style and content; they should reflect local needs and also differing local political priorities. There has always been a tension between Parliament and

local government, but the Bill will result in a degree of tension between the Secretary of State and local government that has never existed. The Bill specifically identifies the extension of capping through the idea that it can be applied over several years, and that extension will further prevent local authorities from developing and financing distinctive plans.

How can the Bill be anything but counter-productive in terms of attracting the best people to local government—the most innovative, dynamic and imaginative people? Who would go into local government, if all they could do was to go through the motions, conforming to some nationally agreed plan and set of targets? The Bill runs counter to the objectives laid down by the Government in various documents on local democracy about encouraging the involvement of good people in local councils early in their lives.

Few people could argue with the principle of best value that underpins the Bill and is central to the delivery of its stated aims of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, but the target-setting, measurement and consultation must be set, led and delivered locally. Local authorities must be more than simply agencies of central Government. The Bill is based on the view that the problem of local government is that standards of service are too variable, but its solution is prescription. Instead, the solution should be to enable local government to become more accountable to its electors, who will vote for best value when they recognise the relationship between what they pay and the quality and level of service that they receive.

There are examples of that from around the country, both in Labour and Tory councils, which are recognised as providing a good service. They achieve genuine levels of local enthusiasm and, accordingly, generate local support, but, too often, local elections have become simply a vehicle for people to exercise judgments about particular Governments or political parties. Bland, uniform and mediocre local authorities, largely unaffected by local decision making, will not enhance local democracy; they will not encourage greater turnout at elections, nor attract better people to serve their local communities, but will damage and weaken local democracy. At the very best, the Bill is a missed opportunity. At worst, it exacerbates many of those problems and will further weaken our democracy.

7.55 pm

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): It is interesting to follow a political neighbour, if not a political friend. The views expressed by the hon. Gentleman are a long way from how I understand the Bill.

I warmly welcome the Bill and the role that it has to play. Although it has been criticised as too narrowly financial, the House should recognise that it is part of a package of measures designed to address the real needs of local government and local democracy. After 20 years of experience in local government, I cannot share the rather apathetic views of some hon. Members—surprisingly, even some of my Labour colleagues—who believe that turnouts of 20 or 30 per cent. at local elections are somehow acceptable.

I am delighted that we are addressing the need to rejuvenate local democracy. The one point on which I agree with the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) is that local democracy will be healthy when local people actually vote on the issues affecting their communities, rather than acting as a national opinion poll on the Government of the day. The tasks are challenging, but we all have an interest in supporting them.

In welcoming the Bill, I was amused to hear, if not the deathbed repentance, then the repentance from the coffin of the Opposition, because after living through 18 years when their actions showed us what they believed in, it was almost like being in a dream to hear what the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) had to say about local government. The Opposition must think that the electorate are fools if they really think that their actions will be seen as anything other than electoral posturing and the search for short-term political advantage. I genuinely hope that the Opposition will develop their views, as we need to be united nationally on some issues if we are to achieve proper local government.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing was often accused of being on message; she was on manifesto. The Bill delivers what I was elected to support and I shall enter the Division Lobbies with pleasure tonight. The Bill has been criticised: people have asked whether it will work. The House considers legislation, especially secondary legislation, in arcane and out-of-date ways, but I do not believe that that is a good reason to prevent the Government from having good management techniques. That is a danger in the arguments, especially those of the Liberal Democrats, about secondary legislation. One of the lessons that I learned quickly in Parliament was that Governments are rightly judged as succeeding or failing not by legislation, although that is an important element, but by how they use legislation. Decisions made by Ministers determine whether the country prospers and the people benefit from a change in Government. We shall not know how the Bill will work until Ministers use the powers that it gives them.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing, probably through the voice of the Deputy Prime Minister, gave the biggest single boost to local government finance for my county council in 20 years. That boost was given under some of the same legislation through which we had received some of the worst settlements during the previous four or five years.

Mr. David Heath: I represent a part of the country that was capped by the Government after an election that had produced an overwhelming majority in the county for higher expenditure. Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on one phrase in his speech: management techniques? Is not that the crux of the matter? The Government are still determined to manage local government instead of providing for local autonomy, and Liberal Democrat Members will not stand for that.

Dr. Turner: I entirely disagree. Good management is not about telling everyone what to do, as the hon. Gentleman seems to think; it is about delegating, and ensuring that decisions are made at the right level. That, however, does not mean that the buck will stop lower down. Ultimately, it will continue to stop with Ministers.

In running the nation, we want to get the balance right. We want to be clear about the decisions that are made, and about who is responsible. That is what the electorate

[Dr. Turner]

need. Nevertheless, I accept that, in a country the size of ours and given our system of government, Ministers will want to reserve unto themselves some powers that reflect the fact that that is where the buck stops. I know—we all know—that, in the case of certain things that happen in local government and are experienced by the local electorate, Ministers will get the blame, and I have no doubt that Opposition Members will try to heap that blame on them when the time comes. One of the features of local government today is the fact that we have not yet achieved the right balance between Government and local decision making in terms of powers and the language that we use.

One of the difficulties that the House will experience in discussing local government is caused by the variety of quality to be found in local government. Local government is not black or white; it genuinely comes in all sorts of shades. During the 20 years I served in local government, I saw dedicated councillors who were in touch with their electorate, properly representing the views of that electorate and the interests of their community, acting with knowledge and appointing officers who gave good professional advice. I saw councillors who were keen to ensure that the best information technology techniques, and the best ways of running organisations, applied in their authorities. However, I also saw councillors who were more interested in posturing, uttering slogans and, in fact, abusing local people—more interested in academic argument that might, at times, be more appropriate in the Chamber—than in delivering local services. I believe that some of the difficulties facing the Government when they draw up a Bill such as this are caused by the wide range of performance, whether at council or officer level.

The difficulty and the danger are posed by the fact that we need to enact legislation to deal with the needs of the people who are unfortunate enough to have the worst councils, while ensuring that the rules do not discourage or prevent innovation and the progress of the very best. It is in that regard that Ministers must use their judgment.

As one who was a member of a local authority, I am well aware that compulsory competitive tendering wasted money. I sat on committee after committee which saw that the total cost to the public purse was larger than it would have been without CCT. However, I am glad that the Government are not saying simply that they will turn the clock back. Twenty years ago in local government, there was much to be challenged. The Bill addresses the need to achieve value for money, which will challenge councils to ensure that modern approaches and tools such as information technology can tell us what constitutes best practice.

It has been suggested that the Government are trying to create uniformity. I am well aware of the richness and variety of the ways in which local government is currently administered. By no means is a single formula applied locally, and I do not think that there is any intention that should happen. We should succour the rich experimentation that is currently taking place, and I do not think that the Bill does anything to prevent that; but we must learn the lessons of those who experiment. Experiments that fail must be abandoned, and when experiments succeed, that best practice needs to be propagated in local government. That, I think, is the underlying philosophy of the Bill.

My experience as a Member has been coloured by the fact that my office is opposite that of Kings Lynn and West Norfolk borough council. Because of that proximity, I have felt a keen interest in the doings of the borough council, and I am delighted to note that, rather than feeling that it will pushed into something by legislation, the council has addressed the issue ahead of time. I believe that it was the first public body in the country to gain an "investors in people" award. It has received three charter marks, and a number of its services are benchmarked to ISO9002, a quality standard for service delivery.

Two years ago, the council made a commitment that it would work to the British Quality Foundation's business excellence model. That commitment will underpin its service review. It said that it would review its services in three years. I consider that a challenging objective, and I look forward to receiving the report, in a month or two, on its housing, financial, IT and refuse collection services for the current year.

I think that there is a broad welcome for the Bill. I believe that many people in local government feel that shackles have been removed, and that they can work in a different way with a different Government. However—and I speak as one who complained about capping when I was a councillor—we must face the fact that the slogan "Give them the money, Bernie", implying that the Government should provide the vast majority of the money and then let local authorities get on with the decision-making and the spending, is not a reasonable model.

The last Government treated local authorities as though they were in the doghouse. Certainly, the rules were simple enough for a dog to understand. It is possible that the present Government are treating local government as something more like an adolescent. As children grow older, the rules become more complicated, but they are still there. I hope that we shall see an evolution and a development in local government. After 18 years of its being denigrated, blamed, hit, limited and constrained, it will take a few years of the present Government to change the backdrop. I hope that we shall see a relaxation in the minds of Ministers, at least, in terms of regulation and control; and if the measures that the Government are introducing in regard to democracy succeed, I think that we can further empower the process of local accountability. It is not there yet, though, and I understand Ministers' concern about capping.

We must see progress. Ultimately, the quality of those in local government will determine what happens. The quality of the officers is clearly critical, but more important than that is the quality of the members, because they determine who the officers are. They need to be given a task that is worth while and a time scale in which to perform it, and they need plaudits as well as brickbats.

I believe that we are on a sensible agenda, but it will take time. We shall not know the answers until after we have passed the Bill—which I am sure that we shall—and see with what wisdom and success Ministers can use it. Undoubtedly, many of the problems of the past decade or so have been caused by the way in which Ministers who are now Opposition Members misused, and abused, their powers.

8.9 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): We have heard very good speeches from the Opposition Front Bench, and interesting and well-put speeches from the Government Back Benches. We heard a good speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow); but I was somewhat disappointed by the speech of the hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner). At one point, I thought that he was arguing against local elections, although I felt that I had a great deal of common ground with him when he intervened earlier.

The Bill, in effect, transfers power from the market to Whitehall, bypassing residents on the way. It simply confirms that local government in England is exercised only at the discretion of Whitehall and, in particular, the Treasury. Encouraging consultation while preventing local government from meeting the needs that may be highlighted is a bit like an adult telling a child that the siren indicates that the van has run out of ice cream. The principle of self-governance is not shared in government because the Government and their so-called third way do not trust the people.

Gladstone once said that liberalism is trust of the people tempered by prudence, and conservatism is mistrust of the people tempered by fear. New labourism appears to be distrust of the people tempered by focus groups. What is the Bill all about? The answer is in the explanatory notes on the effects of the Bill on public sector finances:

"The improved efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources which result is expected to deliver significant costs savings across the board, as well as improvements in service quality."

The Bill promises us something for nothing. We have heard that so many times. The notes also say:

"There will be some costs of compliance with the best value provisions of the Bill which will fall upon authorities, and which may involve them incurring new costs . . . Such costs will be expected to be contained within existing budgets"—

so there are no new resources with the Bill.

The council tax provisions will enable the Government to restrict excessive increases in council tax. That will control total revenue expenditure in England of over £50 billion and in Wales of over £2 billion, so it is about control of expenditure—something for nothing, no extra resources, central Government control.

How does that chime with the Government's ratification of the European charter of local self-government? How can a Government who commit themselves to the importance and independence of democratically elected government propose hit squads and further powers for Whitehall to intervene—nationally set performance standards, central powers of reserve to cap locally set budgets, new audit and inspection arrangements?

The Minister said that the Bill was pushing powers out of Whitehall to the town hall, yet there are 27 new central powers in the Bill. If the Minister's claims were to stand up to scrutiny, she would have been introducing a Bill to give local government the power of general competence and a system of proportional representation for local elections, where the ballot box, not the Secretary of State, would be the final arbiter of performance and tax raising.

The hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) was right when he described the measure as an example of the mistrust of local government, a mistrust that has led to a lack of transparency in local government finance, leaving local taxpayers confused over whom to blame for cuts, tax rises or waste; but the most pernicious aspect of the Bill is the council tax benefit clawback. The poorest areas are hit the hardest. As a national newspaper put it the other weekend:

"The real issues are local choice and local democracy. Labour's scheme is capping in all but name—and indeed treats poorer councils worse than the Tory shires. The new measures are mostly contained in regulation changes, rather than legislation, and so will be confined to a House of Commons Committee. But the powers necessary to enact the reform are in the Local Government Bill. *The Observer* hopes that some honour is left among New Labour's back-bench MPs. If this was too much for Mrs. Thatcher, it should certainly be too much for New Labour."

I fear that the Division will prove that it is not.

8.14 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I particularly welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, given the subject of my private Member's Bill, the Local Authority Tenders Bill, which went through in the previous Session—or rather did not go through. During nine months of negotiations with the social partners, I spent a rather torturous time looking at ways in which we could come to an agreement to push forward best value, which the Minister has now brought before us with the comprehensive package in the Bill, which I welcome.

For obvious reasons, therefore, I would like to restrict my remarks to clause 17. I know that all hon. Members always start by saying that they are going to restrict their remarks and then talk about everything. I will try not to do that.

Clause 17 allows the Secretary of State to change the list of non-commercial considerations that the local authority can take into account when putting a contract out to tender. Before we get too technical, I would like to outline what that means in plain English. Previously, under compulsory competitive tendering, that was not possible. A local authority was able to take into account only the lowest bid essentially. In my experience, that led to a Dutch auction that favoured cowboys, to the extent that many employer organisations now feel that CCT is a great disadvantage and of disbenefit to them; reputable employers are put at a disadvantage. Disreputable employers are able to reduce terms and conditions of employment, reduce wages and thereby get an advantage and win a contract.

That often harms the employers themselves. We have seen numerous instances of employers going bankrupt after they have gone for the cheapest bid that they could and then were not able to deliver the service. The local authority and, most important, the public also lost out.

I would like a move away from the dogma. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have been guilty on occasion of wallowing in dogma. The Bill represents a move from away from that. As the Minister has clearly put it, it is not the means; it is the ends. We want to look at best value. Whoever is able to provide best value and fair employment practices as well has an absolute right to win contracts.

I do not wish to see the previous bias towards the private sector replaced with an unthinking bias towards any other sector, be that public or otherwise, because the

[Ms Oona King]

most important point is about quality and standards. It is about how we deliver the service, not who delivers it. I hope that there might be some common ground there.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): As ever, the hon. Lady makes it sound oh so reasonable, but clause 17 could be a ticking time bomb because it allows the Secretary of State to re-introduce dogma if he likes and all sorts of non-competitive, dogmatic policies to ensure that, in many cases, private industry is discriminated against.

Ms King: The hon. Gentleman says that the issues are dogmatic. May I raise some of the particular ones to which he refers, such as equal pay? In my view, that should not be difficult—*[Interruption.]* You are going like that as if to say—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not going anything like that.

Ms King: Thank you Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) was making an indication as if to say that it is unreasonable to suggest that a local authority should seek to uphold good employment practices with public money. That is an issue that does divide the House. Labour Members believe that it is the responsibility of a local authority to uphold good employment practice. I make no apologies for that.

During the negotiations with the social partners, the CBI agreed wholeheartedly—

Ms Armstrong: Some Conservatives said earlier that the CBI is made up of a bunch of socialists.

Ms King: It is true that the Conservative party appears to label the CBI socialists, communists or worse even. The social partners agreed on areas where such interventions would be possible and where they would be sensible and in the interest of providing and delivering a better service. I fail to see why the Conservative party finds that so inimical to business because business itself does not. During the Committee stage of my private Members's Bill, I had meetings with many representatives of the business community and I was struck by the fact that they said, "We do not want cowboy contractors to be able to put in a lower bid and cut us out of the loop so that we lose business or go out of business." It was a bizarre "Through the Looking Glass" experience because Conservative Members were arguing against dealing with that. It was rather strange.

The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) said that he was proud of CCT and perhaps the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) shares that view. I wonder whether they are proud of the fact that the courts have ruled that CCT was discriminatory towards women. It was clearly proven. I wonder whether the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen take issue with the court's ruling. That is an important point but, as is often the case, sadly, there is not a single woman on the Opposition Benches.

I now want to talk about the third way. I am waiting for Conservative Members to groan because they did so very nicely earlier on. Unfortunately, the notion of the third way is often met with derision. I used to be a trade union officer and, during negotiations with employers, when we were unwilling to find any common ground we both lost out. I cannot understand the refusal of certain Conservative Members to accept that in the past we have said, for example, that the public sector is good and the private sector is bad and that we should move away from such views. That is what the third way means and it is clearly incorporated into the Bill. I welcome that and I hope that, at some time in the future, Conservative Members will also welcome it.

There is a coincidence of interests between employers and employees. As I have said, reputable employers and many employees suffered under CCT. Changing that system will benefit both those groups. It is about building on what has been termed the new employment agenda, which explicitly recognises that the way in which employees are treated has an impact on the quality of the services provided to the community. If one cares about the service that the community receives, hopefully one would care about building upon a new employment agenda, which has been outlined in the memorandum from the social partners. That memorandum states:

"Our approach is based on a determination to construct a new and co-operative relationship between public and private sectors."

That is the third way. It is not a media soundbite. Some people ask what it is. They ask whether it is directions from the motorway or instructions from "The Kama Sutra". There is a great deal of confusion. *[Laughter.]* I will not go into the various positions one might take on that, but it is straightforward. It does not rest on the shallow grave of a media soundbite, which some people might suggest. In the new culture of partnership, we recognise that the old adage of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. Under CCT blind stupidity reigned and all the key actors were set against one another.

Clause 17 allows the Secretary of State to change the list of prescribed non-commercial considerations. All the social partners agree that the current regulations must be reformed. They have already agreed on a list of areas where it would be legitimate to ask questions about a contractor's employment record and are currently discussing the details for putting that into operation.

Mr. Evans: As somebody who has never thought that the third way had anything to do with "The Kama Sutra", I must say that the hon. Lady has obviously given this much thought. Why cannot this be put into the Bill so that it can be properly debated in the Chamber, in Committee and in the other place? If the Government already know what the non-commercial activities are to be, let us have them up front and in the Bill.

Ms King: When the social partners spent more than nine months seeking a negotiated agreement on what could be put forward and the Government have said that, in consultation with the social partners, they will decide on the list, I cannot see any merit in the hon. Gentleman's objections. The areas on which the social partners have agreed include quality, training, health and safety, disability and racial equality, equal pay and gender equality. Those are all issues which, no doubt, make the Opposition squirm. The social partners have recognised that those areas have a valid place and I hope that Conservative Members might recognise that.

In essence, we must ensure that the tendering process is not used as a barrier to higher quality services, fair competition or employment protection. We need to place

the public interest first. That is something that, on certain occasions, both sides of the House have failed to do . It is what we are trying to do now. I commend my hon. Friend the Minister for her comprehensive efforts in this area and I look forward to better public services, enabling the rejuvenation of local government that is so long overdue.

8.27 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): There are certain political realities in local government. One is that, the further one is from controlling national government, the more one is in favour of freedom for local government. I listened carefully to the speech made by the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders). I agreed with much of what he said until he began to talk about proportional representation, which is not a panacea to bring about improvement.

The Government took office with an agenda stating that they must get rid of competitive tendering and some of the other dreadful things that the Tories introduced, such as capping. They have suddenly realised that if they do that, a degree of control will slip. As a result, those things have been redesigned. The chains may have been taken off, but other chains have been introduced to replace them.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) noted earlier that there were 27 new powers in the Bill. That is instructive. This is a technical Bill that could be used by a future Secretary of State to control local government however he wished. The criteria are more general than under the previous Government, when issues were more overt and up front.

I am proud of my 14 years service in local government. Local government is a good institution with some capable people. It is probably as efficient as Whitehall and national Government and probably scrutinises more. I spent hours in committee crawling over relatively small sums of money. That level of scrutiny of Government expenditure is not evident in this Chamber. Local government is sometimes unfairly run down, even by my party. It has a good reputation.

Many people have an affinity with their local authority, particularly in old established boroughs such as Poole, which has celebrated its 750th anniversary. There is also strong affinity with local government in many shire counties and metropolitan areas. The Government should pay special regard to that. I am not a great enthusiast for regional government, because it would be an artificial creation. I would far rather have more power passed down to local authorities, allowing people to make mistakes on occasions, but to make them in their own communities. That would be better than creating artificially large regional government institutions.

Compulsory competitive tendering was helpful for those in local government who wanted more efficiency. Before the Local Government Act 1988, service standards often did not have to be specified by local government officers. The Act made them think carefully about the service that they were providing and set a market price.

Market prices are not the be all and end all, but it is useful to know what things cost when going out to tender. CCT often generated savings. Sometimes it did not, but it is reassuring in any form of government to test the price of a service. In rural Wiltshire, where I grew up, local authorities, under whatever party, tended to take a minimalist approach to local government and were not highly overstaffed, so the savings tended to be smaller. However, there were many large urban authorities with large direct labour organisations, some of which did not even have to prepare proper accounts before CCT regulations. Even after the regulations, they found it difficult to do so. They were living off the rate payers and rent payers and sometimes providing very bad services.

A great deal of progress was made under CCT, but perhaps there is an argument for moving on. However, all that one can say about best value is that it sounds like something that we might find in a supermarket, but none of us knows what we shall get from it. To know whether best value will work, we have to see the detail. We have not seen it yet. It is a pity to overthrow the CCT regulations and go for best value, when we may not find out important details until the regulations are drafted.

It will be difficult to measure economy, efficiency and effectiveness without a regime for testing the price. When the details of best value are made known, I hope that there will be more tendering than there currently appears to be. One Labour Back Bencher said that best value was verbiage. That is fair. We shall have to wait and see how the Government fill in the details.

Labour had a manifesto commitment to abolish crude and universal capping. I am not sure that they have done that. The details of the Bill suggest that the new system will be worse, because we are moving towards a more secretive, arbitrary capping system. The big advantage of telling authorities their capping level in advance is that they can discipline themselves to keep within it. If authorities are not told, more of them are likely to be capped because they will step over a mark without knowing that it exists. It is a bit like having a blind auction or an auction of promises, with local authorities guessing where the level is, rather than knowing.

That will lead to all sorts of problems. Making the system less overt will take some of the fairness out of it, because authorities will not know where they stand. Because the criteria will be more general, people may not understand why one authority is capped and another is not. Less clear criteria will lead to more argument in local government. Authorities will be tempted into breaking what will retrospectively be deemed the cap, which will lead to all sorts of difficulties, such as rebilling.

The Conservative Government went through a steep learning curve on capping. They moved away from capping councils after they had set their budget because that forced them to rebill. I fear that the new Government will have to learn some of the same lessons that the previous Government learnt.

I am not sure that we shall get much further forward with the new capping regime. Where people stand will not be as clear. If there is to be a capping regime, it is important that treasurers and officers can advise their members on where they stand with reasonable certainty. I have sat on a local government finance committee and voted to spend up to the cap several times because we knew what the limit was and it seemed sensible to spend up to it. It was a pity that if we underspent we could not roll over the savings year by year. That gave no incentive to make savings.

The proposal for capping over more than one year could well cause problems, particularly if we move to annual elections. If control of an authority which was

[Mr. Robert Syms]

capped for years one, two and three changed within that period, an authority under different political control would inherit the capped budget of its predecessor.

The proposal under clause 24 to make an authority pay the excess council tax benefit is also fraught with difficulties. One has only to look at the back of the Library brief which sets the various options. The Government will very much regret that proposal. It is extremely complex and is likely to cause great difficulties in future. I am sure that it will be examined in great detail in Committee. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) said, the nearly poor could end up subsidising the poor, particularly in boroughs with houses in categories A and B such as Pennine towns; that could prove disastrous.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex said that he supported beacon councils. I have great reservations, however. The Bill refers to the setting up of an independent advisory panel. Would it be independent in the same way as the Jenkins commission or would it be independent from the Government? Again, we will come back to a subjective view about what is and is not good in particular authorities. Council officers will invest much time and effort in trying to win beacon council awards which may give them some latitude in respect of their finances. Although we must encourage best practice, I am not sure that that is the best way to do it. I was never a great one for charter marks either as I am not keen on handing out lollipops. We must try to ensure best practice across the board without being too prescriptive; I am not sure that beacon councils are the best way to do that.

Finally, the Government have started to learn that they do not want to lose some of the powers that the previous Government had. We have to see how best value turns out as we do not have the details. The capping regime in the Bill is worse than that introduced by the previous Government because it is less obvious to local authorities how it will work and one or two provisions in the Bill will give the Government headaches. I do not know which of my right hon. and hon. Friends will be on the Committee, but I am sure that it will be interesting.

8.37 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I welcome the Bill whole-heartedly. It is part of the Government's wider programme to modernise local government. In my view, it strikes the correct balance between local accountability and initiative and an entirely necessary element of oversight and scrutiny by central Government, and, significantly, by the National Assembly for Wales.

The abolition of the inflexible and discredited CCT system and the crude concept of rate capping is entirely overdue. The new duty of best value and the duties to review, consult, appraise and engage continuously in a process of improvement simply mirror good management. Significantly, it is what the public have the right to expect.

To strike a note of criticism about the manner in which the Bill is drafted—I speak as a lawyer—schedule 2 is impenetrably complex. If one is striving towards transparency and engaging with the general public, surely there is a case for simplifying legislation on local government finance.

As the only Welsh Member to have spoken so far in the debate, although there has been an intervention by the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), I should like to stress that the Bill applies not only to England but to Wales. In the context of Wales it is qualitatively different. I notice that the Minister agrees.

The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), is to wind up the debate, and I should be grateful if he would respond to some points. To my knowledge, this is the only Bill so far directly to provide order-making powers not to the Secretary of State for Wales, but to the National Assembly for Wales—a democratically elected body that is at the forefront of constitutional change not only in Wales, but in the rest of the UK.

I hope that the Bill is the shape of things to come, and it is heartening that it conforms with the spirit of devolution. It is a framework Bill to provide enabling powers, and it is not overly prescriptive. It does prescribe the concept of best value, but there is a public expectation that basic services such as education and social services should be run properly and in accordance with best value.

The Bill is remarkably light on mandatory requirements thereafter. The provisions on performance indicators, reviews, timetabling and—significantly in the case of Wales—intervention and reserved powers are all permissive, and not mandatory. In the context of Wales, the provisions are dependent on the democratic will of the people of Wales through the Assembly, and that is significant.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will know that a key provision of the Government of Wales Act 1998 is section 113, which imposes a statutory duty on the Assembly to sustain and promote local government—a novel concept. That is entirely fitting in a country such as Wales, which places great—perhaps fanatical—emphasis on loyalty to one's own locale and community.

In Welsh literature and history, there is the concept of brogarwch—a dedication to one's milltir sgwar—that is of loyalty to one's locality. Wales is a nation of communities, and it is right that the Government of Wales Act will set up a partnership council between the new tier of regional government and local government. The Bill is consistent with the idea of a partnership council. At first blush it might not seem to be but, frankly, the Bill is permissive and subject to the democratic will of the people of Wales.

How does my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary foresee the partnership council inter-relating in practice with the provisions of the Bill? I agree with the constructive comments of the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) that much of the conceptualisation behind the Bill depends on good will between central Government, regional government—in the case of Wales—and local government. I will be interested to hear my hon. Friend's comments on that. I assume that the National Assembly for Wales can choose not to make any order-making powers, or to make order-making powers which are different from those which apply in England. Again, that is consistent with the spirit of diversity which lies behind the concept of devolution.

Clauses 22, 23 and 24 are technical measures relating to police authorities and reserved powers in relation to precepting authorities. However, the explanatory notes with regard to clause 24 seem to be inconsistent with the Bill. Is it the case that the Secretary of State for Wales will continue to retain powers relating to police authorities? That appears to be the meaning of clause 22,

in which case those reserved powers could be applied by the Secretary of State, but not by the National Assembly, so the position in respect of police authorities would differ from that of unitary authorities. The explanatory notes appear to be somewhat contradictory.

The Bill is part of a programme to modernise local government. Local government has to adopt the role of community leadership. I look forward to the implementation of the legislation and hope that it is not too much to expect that it will herald a new, constructive age of local government. The Bill starts the process of restoring prestige to local government, and I welcome it.

8.45 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas), although he will forgive me for not following up on the issues he raises that relate specifically to Wales.

I was interested to hear the hon. Gentleman refer to the partnership council: every Government Bill should contain a clause that is specifically dedicated to the establishment of a partnership council, for where would we be in the modern age without the Government's belief in partnership? However, the Government's approach is to assume that the partnership sought through all the various mechanisms will deliver everything because everybody will agree with each other all of the time. It is perfectly obvious that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) believes that, if people are brought together, they will agree. In fact, the object of legislation is often to require things to happen when people do not agree: for example, the whole point of capping is not to cover situations where people do what they are enjoined to do, which is not to engage in excessive spending, but, in the Government's own terms, to enable the Government to take reserve powers for the occasions when they do not. We are trying to ensure that powers exist to require local authorities to act responsibly when they are moved not to do so.

When the Bill was published, it was interesting to consider it in the context of the White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People", because there is discontinuity between the then Labour Opposition's pre-election political posturing and all the rhetoric that led up to the Labour manifesto and subsequent events. After the election, instead of action on the aspects of the rhetoric that related to freeing local government and to sweeping away central Government interference and the excessive legislation introduced by the Conservative Administrations, we get only those legislative measures that serve Labour interests. In the Bill and, no doubt, in future legislation on introducing higher standards and controls over ethics and behaviour in local government, we can see that the Labour Administration's agenda on local government is driven by the requirements of dealing with Labour in local government.

The Government know that, to achieve their objectives in local government as dictated to them by their Labour local authorities, who are still in the grip of their relationship with the trade unions, they have to deliver the abolition of compulsory competitive tendering, but how are they to do that within the rhetoric of fiscal responsibility? They do it by talking about best value. Labour's political rhetoric is that we have to do away with the wicked capping that past Tory Administrations used to prevent local authorities from spending money on services; but the Government recognise that authorities—it will inevitably be Labour authorities—who want to engage in excessive spending will have to be constrained from doing so. Their solution is to bring back control not in the guise of crude and universal capping, but as a mechanism that, in its technical aspects, is capable of imposing a system of capping that is just as detailed and constraining as anything that has been applied by past Conservative Administrations.

Again, we see the gap between the rhetoric and the reality. The rhetoric of Labour is about freeing up local government, but the reality is serving the interests of Labour in local government and recognising that Labour local government has deep flaws, which is why this Administration has introduced the Bill.

Dr. George Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman reflect briefly on the fact that Conservative council after Conservative council was capped under the previous Government's regimes? I served on one. Those councils spent up to the cap and that became the norm. The English language was abused, was it not?

Mr. Lansley: Yes. The hon. Gentleman is taking me to a later part of my speech. He will not be surprised to learn that I have difficulties with the manner in which capping regimes have been applied. For example, in recent years, my county council in Cambridgeshire was capped, even under a Conservative Administration. It was capped at the standard spending assessment level, when it had one of the lowest council taxes in the country. In that case, capping was not applied to curb excessive spending.

Capping was introduced because of excessive spending by Labour authorities, but the manner in which previous legislation was implemented led to absurdities, which have constrained local authorities and, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) said quite openly, the Conservative party does not want that policy pursued in future.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: May I help the hon. Gentleman? He is saying that the existing capping criteria are crude and ineffective and that they were unfairly applied to his local authority. Therefore, he should support the Government, because we want to remove that crude capping regime and introduce a fairer system.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman is trying to help me, but he is directing me to the wrong solution. His solution is not the sort of capping that ought to be applied, as I hope hon. Members on both sides of the House recognise. Capping should be applied for excessive spending in year, rather than be spread over a number of years. If there is to be a reserve power, it ought not to be in the form provided for in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) said that schedule 2 was excessively complicated, and we know why. There is only one reason. The schedule is designed to give the Secretary of State great flexibility in the manner in which he applies the capping powers. Therefore, we are not talking about predictable reserve powers, which will operate only if local authorities increase expenditure excessively.

[Mr. Lansley]

I am not trying to write policy and this is not necessarily the best solution, but legislation could specify that the capping regime would be based on a multiple of the increase in council tax at standard spending assessment and that capping would not apply to any local authority that spent within a given margin of the SSA. As we all know, the SSA is not a precise instrument. One of the most objectionable aspects of the regime was that capping was applied at or close to SSA and the Government have proposed in their White Paper that it should apply at or below SSA, which is an absurdity. If there is to be a reserve power, the legislation should specify that the capping regime should not apply within 10 per cent. of the SSA level.

Dr. George Turner: The argument is we[illegible]th pursuing because when we try to simplify [illegible] government, we take away local councillors' ab[illegible] argue for a particular circumstance. The Government are trying to strike a balance between everything being a special case and having an oversimplified system that lays down one rule for everyone.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman has missed the point. I wish that more Labour Members had taken this line as there are reservations on the Government side about the capping powers that the Government propose. The policy is designed to give Ministers—no doubt at their behest, in conversation with officials—the power to do anything that they want at any time.

However, that is not what a reserve power should be. Such a power should permit Parliament to assert that, although there is a case for simplicity, it cannot apply to a large number of authorities except in so far as it sets a boundary beyond which legislation may allow the Secretary of State to intervene. As long as that boundary allows a considerable margin between the cap and the average rate of council tax increase in a given year and that year's standard spending assessment, it is possible for most local authorities, year by year, to remain unaffected by the capping regime. That is what we want, but the Bill will not achieve it. Instead, it will mean that, every year, every local authority will contemplate the character of the capping criteria. They will even worry about the possible capping criteria in the following year that may bite back retrospectively on their budget decisions.

I shall return to the matter of the best value regime. The implication of the contributions from Labour Members is that there is a debate about who is in favour of best value. We are all in favour of it, which is why I find it astonishing that Labour Members should say that Conservative councils tell them that they support best value. Of course Conservative councils say that: I have a letter from the Conservative Cambridgeshire county council that makes it clear that it supports best value. According to the district auditor, that council is doing very well: the wide range of measures that it has adopted has put it at the leading edge among authorities implementing principles associated with best value.

There is no surprise about that. Conservative administrations in local government have led the way in creating best value. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex said, best value is simply an extension of compulsory competitive tendering. If one thinks of best value as being both baby and bath water—with the baby being competition, or CCT—what makes this part of the Bill objectionable is that the Government, far from chucking out the baby with the bath water, are keeping the bath water and chucking out the baby.

A core element of local government activity must be exposed regularly to the harsh rigour of competition through competitive tendering. Otherwise, competition will be lost, by stages, within local government: even benchmarking—by which authorities compare their success with that achieved by the best 25 per cent. of local government practice—will not secure the same best value that could be achieved in a rigorous competitive regime.

The Minister talked about the four Cs—challenge, comparison, competition and consultation—but I fear that we shall find that Labour authorities will not pursue most of them. They will undertake consultation, but they will not challenge Labour authorities' presumption that the more services provided, the better. They certainly will not engage in competition and all comparisons made over time will be confined to local government rather than between the public sector and the private sector.

I share the worry expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) about beacon councils. Performance indicators must be focused on efficiency, cost and value for money if the concept of beacon councils is to have validity. However, I suspect that some of the elements in those performance indicators will be directed too much towards compliance with Government prescription, given that the White Paper often equates quality with volume of service provided. The result will be that beacon councils will be relatively high-spending authorities engaged in relatively high-volume activities and that they will then be rewarded with additional money from Government for precisely that reason.

I have a final point about performance indicators. The White Paper proposes that quality should be one of the performance indicators imposed by Government, but that should happen only when local government is carrying out a function prescribed and required by central Government. If quality performance indicators begin to intrude into services which local government has the discretion to provide or not, central Government will be prescribing what happens inside local government and not allowing local government to strike the essential balance between the provision of service and the cost to the taxpayer. Central Government should, as far as possible, be kept out of that decision. Quality performance indicators should be limited to those activities which it is prescribed in statute that local government must undertake.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) that the Government simply have to understand that council tax benefit limitation will hit hardest in circumstances in which there are many low-value properties and many benefit recipients. I cannot understand why the Government are blundering into this problem. There is an additional difficulty, which I hope that Ministers will consider carefully and try to avoid. It arises in relation to authorities that have been very low spenders and are spending below their SSA. In increasing their council tax, often as a result of a decline in their revenue support grant, authorities may incur a penalty as a consequence of the council tax benefit limitation even though they are

spending below the SSA. As it happens, the worst example is South Cambridgeshire, which will incur a penalty because the council tax benefit threshold is 23 per cent. below the SSA. There is no rationale, even on the sharing of responsibility criterion to which the Minister referred, for a local authority incurring a penalty if it is increasing its council tax, but spending that far below its SSA. I hope that, when Ministers look at the detail of the Bill, they will recognise that problem.

I am disappointed in the legislation. It was perfectly possible to introduce a Bill that retained CCT but put it into a wider context of best value. Such a Bill might have secured a higher degree of support on both sides of the House. It was perfectly possible to introduce legislation with a genuine reserve power in relation to capping rather than the wide discretion that Ministers seek to give themselves.

9.2 pm

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East): I am one who has always believed that the genuineness of democracy depends on how close it is to the people. The nearer democracy is, both ideologically and geographically, the more genuine it is. The more power and decision making wander away—to London or, even worse, to Brussels—the more a democracy fails to represent the people who have rightful ownership of it. That is why local government is so important. That is why it must be made to work, regardless of the local government model that we use. If one form of local democracy does not work, we have no alternative but to keep switching until we find one that does. It is community representation that matters, not the bureaucracy of local government.

Local government election turnouts that sink below 20 per cent. obviously do not help. They send a clear message from the more than 80 per cent. of the electorate who choose not to bother to vote. The message is that something is very wrong with the set-up. Then again, after so many years of attacks on local government by central Government, we should not be surprised by that apathy.

It was the systematic destruction of local democracy that made the Scottish Parliament so necessary. If the Conservatives had remained in power much longer, they would have initiated a demand for a North of England Parliament. I believe that because I was first elected as a ward councillor on the same day that Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. I must say that it was the one and only moment of celebration that we shared, but I was delighted to be elected in May 1979. To be a local councillor in the late 1970s was something to be proud of. I found myself surrounded by men and women of various political persuasions who had spent distinguished lifetimes giving real service to their localities. They had collectively built up local services, improved public health, and demolished slums and erected millions of decent houses in their place.

As institutions, the councils were far from perfect and could certainly have been improved. However, they were generally controlled by decent and committed people who were rightly proud of their achievements. Those councillors never guessed on that fateful day in 1979 that the next 18 years would be the worst in the history of British local democracy and that it would change for ever. Instead of developing and improving the communities in which they lived, those councillors were forced, year on year, to cut services, scrap capital programmes and shrink the wages and conditions of loyal council workers.

Elected councillors quickly became the villains in almost everyone's eyes, as central Government forced them to increase rates, impose the poll tax and simultaneously devastate the local services that they had previously nurtured, for no pay, in their leisure time and often on top of full-time jobs. As the pressure mounted, many of those who had served their communities so well grew tired and stood down, and local government was the loser.

It is to be hoped that that is behind us now, but immense damage has been done. I believe that it will take many years to rebuild the respect, dignity and satisfaction once associated with being a councillor. However, the job must be done because local democracy must be strengthened; it must be changed and made to count again. I welcome the Bill as a meaningful start. As local government acquires power, it must begin to assume more responsibility. That is the only way that we shall return to the days when local people believed that it was important to turn up and vote in council elections.

It appears that almost everyone welcomes the abolition of compulsory competitive tendering. The Confederation of British Industry says that the time is right to move away from CCT, and the Local Government Association particularly welcomes the abolition of CCT and the inclusion of best value proposals. It makes one wonder who was in favour of CCT in the first place. In all honesty, CCT gave local authorities the incentive to move out of the competitive dark ages, but it was clearly too blunt an instrument. The concept of best value is clearly better than compulsory competitive tendering and should be supported.

Best value must certainly not be a soft option. I welcome the fact that the CCT regime will not be removed until best value legislation is in place. The problem with CCT was that far too many local authorities concentrated on survival and finding ways of getting around the regulations, rather than on delivering better public services. I was reminded of the many bonus schemes that I experienced in industry when employees spent more time finding ways of getting around the schemes than producing goods. CCT was introduced in an atmosphere of confrontation that was the hallmark of Government in the early 1980s. Instead of being viewed as a partner of central Government, local government was treated as the enemy. I am not referring only to Labour-controlled councils; Tory councils were often treated with just as much contempt by the Government of the day.

The Bill moves us on and, it is to be hoped, will ensure that continual improvements in quality and efficiency are at the heart of best value. I worry about the detail of best value and would certainly have welcomed more insight into how the intervention process will work. We all await that with trepidation.

Best value will not work if it becomes as threatening and destructive as compulsory competitive tendering. My local authority in Bolton does not need—and never needed—to be told that it is good to be more efficient. It has enough nous and incentive to drive for efficiency improvements and it has certainly been forced to make enough cuts over the years to understand how significant efficiency savings are. It is much more important that we allow councils voluntarily to do better and that we jointly seek better local government, because if we fail, the public will increasingly respond by staying at home on

[Mr. David Crausby]

election days. As the public stop voting locally, local democracy will be diminished and will reach the point at which it is no longer representative or democratic.

Bolton council understands that and has as much interest in ensuring public support and confidence as anyone. That is why, in advance of the Bill, Bolton has already set up a best value team. That is why it has taken initiatives to ensure constant improvement in local services through partnership with the public. I very much welcome the steps that the council has taken, especially its vision for future partnership with organisations from the whole community, including business, trade unions, the voluntary sector, the police and many others.

The clear powers in the Bill will enable Bolton council, and authorities across the country, to take on a more effective community leadership role. The Bill will reinforce and build on the progress that has already been made through such initiatives as the Bolton vision for the future, the 3Ds partnership and the Halliwell central forum.

On council tax capping, I welcome the removal of the existing capping powers and their replacement with more discriminating reserve powers. However, I believe, as I am sure many of us do, that our ultimate objective should be to abolish capping entirely. Power and responsibility go hand in hand and we should trust that the local community will remove the power of its local politicians if they become irresponsible. If the public choose not to do that, so be it. That is what I understand local democracy to be. If the public are willing to pay increasing levels of council tax, that is their choice. Levels of local taxation should be decided locally. If the decision on how much to pay were set free from interference by central Government, that might increase local election turnout more than anything else.

It is obvious that we need a Bill that will deliver what the White Paper suggested—local government in touch with the people. However, to achieve that goal, we must trust local government and the local community and allow them to run their own affairs.

9.14 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I should declare an honorary interest as an honorary vice-president of the Local Government Association, which, although I am proud to be one, is not a great distinction because many hon. Members are vice-presidents of the LGA. I should also list my crimes—I was a member of Somerset county council for 12 years, leader of the council, chairman of the police authority and vice-chairman of two national bodies. For three years, I was on the Audit Commission. Quaintly, like many hon. Members who were in local government and now find themselves in Parliament, I still believe in local government and local democracy and I am prepared to stand up and say so because it is important.

Unfortunately, coming to this place seems to have addled my brain. When I intervened on the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), I was incapable of remembering a list of three things, which is a shame. We argued for so many years with Conservative Governments for the need to remove capping—of course—the need to reform the uniform business rate, which it seems we spent yesterday reinforcing, and the removal of the wretched area cost adjustment, into which I shall not go because it is not relevant, but on which the Government are ducking the issue.

We should welcome some parts of the Bill. The removal of compulsory competitive tendering is the obvious case in point. The problem with CCT was always the first C. There was nothing wrong with competitive tendering as a process, a tool of local government. The compulsion was wrong. Distortions introduced by Conservative legislation meant the removal of fair competition and the stripping of local authorities of much work that had been properly done. Incidentally, CCT did not result in such good value to the taxpayer because of the value-added element that was lost in the process—let alone the detrimental effect on employees.

I welcome in broad terms the best value proposal, but I am worried as to whether the guidance will become uniform. My experience on the Audit Commission made it clear that it is very difficult to move from using performance indicators, however sophisticated they are, to a process that enables the establishment of best practice without dictating best practice. The most important thing is the capacity for communities to take local decisions that are right for them. I hope that local government will be properly involved in the derivation of performance indicators and in identifying areas that are best left to the local electorate to determine. There must be real choice in local government. If it means anything, it is the capacity to make a proposal and allow people a choice on the basis of that proposal.

I am worried about clause 14. I listened carefully to the Minister comment on how a general power of competence would not achieve similar results. I hope that we shall have a chance in Committee to explore the audit trail further, because I am not convinced that it does not exist. One area that is outside the audit trail of either the Audit Commission or the National Audit Office at the moment is that of quangos, such as housing associations. We have begged time and again for them to be included in the audit regime. None the less, I cannot see how bodies that are separately audited by authorities and set up by Parliament can fall outside the audit trail.

The major problem is capping. We have heard all this nonsense about reserve powers before. We heard it from the previous Government, yet, eventually, every single county council was capped. That was not the use of a reserve power; it was universal capping. The pre-notification issue, about which we have also heard before, is equally important. An indeterminate sword of Damocles hung over local authorities, which was detrimental to the way in which local authorities were managed and not in the best interests of rate payers.

All sorts of issues are involved in the way in which capping will be implemented in its new form, such as that concerning authorities that are already spending below the standard spending assessment. SSAs are arbitrary, not accurate, measures. It would be quite wrong to use them as a test of whether a council is competent and efficient.

The essential issue on which I shall dwell is that of democracy. If we do not give local voters real choices, why on earth should they vote? The Conservatives made that mistake over many years in government. By introducing universal capping and ensuring that there was no difference in total spend, they removed any local

argument for electing Conservative councillors, and paid the penalty for it. It worries me that the new proposals will achieve exactly the same by other means—by virtue of best value, dictation from the centre and the reserve power of capping.

Dr. George Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heath: No, I do not have time.

It worries me that we shall not create the essential element of local democracy: the capacity to take local decisions for local people and communities. That is what local government and local democracy are about, and it should be what this Government are about.

9.19 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): We have had an interesting debate. We heard 18 Back-Bench speakers, many of them with long years of service in local government, so a great deal of experience was brought to the debate. Instead of attacks on capping and compulsory competitive tendering, it might have been appropriate if those on the Labour Benches had offered apologies for the antics of some of their local authorities over many years. I am referring not just to the imposition of high council taxes, but to mismanagement and, in too many cases, corruption as well.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: I want to make a little progress as I do not have much time, but I shall give way to the hon. Lady later.

We are used to local authorities twinning, but a number of Labour-controlled authorities have overdone it. Poor service was twinned with high council taxes. To those authorities, beacon councils meant not beacons, but bonfires on which their council tax money seemed to go up in smoke, without any impact on services.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) seemed to associate large sums of money with much better services. Time and again, the figures proved that that was not the case. Some of the authorities with the highest council taxes and the highest level of expenditure had the poorest levels of service. We must divorce the two and find out how the money can be effectively and efficiently spent.

I went through this morning's newspapers expecting to read the usual spin doctors' reports on the Bill, telling us how wonderful it was and how it would restore local democracy, free local government and keep faith with the councils. Instead of that, the newspapers were dominated by national politics and the Prime Minister's attempts to fight back after the Government's black Christmas. *The Guardian* reported that the Government's fight-back

"got off to a shaky start . . . as ministers braced themselves for hard times ahead".

It referred to

"three grim weeks which have cost two ministers and one spin doctor's jobs".

Perhaps that was the spin doctor who would normally have spun this sort of story.

Someone less generous than I might have accused the Government of engineering the back-stabbing and in-fighting as a distraction from their policies, especially on local government. As the Government relaunch themselves, they tell us that they want to move away from personality to policy. If the Bill is an example of policy, no wonder the papers are full of personality. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) said that many hon. Members had read the Bill and read between the lines. They know exactly what the Bill means.

The hon. Member for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) said that he hoped that local government would be judged on its own merits and not used as a poll on national Government. After 18 months of Labour Government, I understand why he should say that. The Bill represents the continuation of an approach that lacks direction, consistency and detailed thought.

As we enter a new century, we witness attacks on our constitution and an erratic reform of government at all levels. *[Interruption.]* The Bill is part of that pattern and comes from the Government who have given us one institution for Scotland with a certain set of powers, including tax-raising powers; another institution for Wales, where the Welsh Assembly will take on many of the powers mentioned in the Bill; a different set of powers for London, with a directly elected mayor; and voting systems that beggar belief, especially the closed-list system for European elections.

We are constantly told to look at the big picture, but there is no big picture of which these reforms form part—only a series of small pictures which bear no relation to one another. *[Interruption.]* It is not a grand mosaic, but a system of crazy paving. None of these reforms—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but we cannot have a continuous sedentary chorus from those on the Government Front Bench.

Mr. Evans: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. None of these reforms will help. My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) called them half-baked, but that gives them credit that they ill deserve.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: The reforms to CCT and capping continue the hotch-potch and mish-mash that will leave local government in the dark and uncertain of its relationship with central Government.

Dr. Jones: I was initially motivated to intervene when the hon. Gentleman talked about the antics of local government. Then he talked about half-baked ideas. That reminded me of the Conservative Government's performance in power. The hon. Gentleman talks about antics, but what about the Tories, who rushed ahead with rail privatisation, costing the taxpayer £1.5 billion? Surely that is a much worse antic than any that local government has ever got up to. Many of local government's antics have been the result of pressures put on it by the Tory Government, which resulted in a waste of money in bureaucracy, the hiring of consultants—the beauty contest. Too many antics were initiated by the Tory Government.

Mr. Evans: That is a deviation. I enjoyed the hon. Lady's earlier intervention because she has enormous

[Mr. Evans]

reservations about the Bill. I thought that new Labour could see the merits of privatisation and competition; that it agrees with privatisation, including of the railways. I see no provision for the renationalisation of the railways. I suspect that the Government have seen the merits of that.

The Bill simply continues the mish-mash of the existing relationship. In new Labour's brave new world, local government will have to adhere to some of the new rules of the game, except that it will not be told what the rules are, and they will change from local authority to local authority. The Bill tells us that dogma is out, but dog's dinner is in, and all sorts of scraps are thrown around.

CCT and capping gave certainty and predictability in local government. It gave value for money and new disciplines to a system that was running away with itself. It introduced competition. We heard from the hon. Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby), that CCT had some merits. We heard that, albeit begrudgingly, from a number of Labour Members. They conceded its benefits to local government. It has enabled local authorities to escape from the accumulation of trade union diktat and Spanish practices which benefited the provider of services at the expense of the recipient and the council tax payer. We must always remember that.

We have talked a little today about the electorate and how to get more people out to vote. But we must always remember the level of service that council tax payers receive. It is important to them that we get it right. CCT was introduced in the teeth of Labour opposition in the 1980s and throughout 1988, when it was extended—Labour now sees the benefits of that, including savings of about 7 per cent.

There are too many reserve powers and unanswered questions in the Bill. It dilutes competition and gives enormous discretion to the Secretary of State. Hon. Members from both sides of the House have already criticised the Henry VIII clauses.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman once again, but there should not be a mini-discussion among Opposition Members either. If hon. Members do not want to listen to the debate, I suggest that they leave the Chamber.

Mr. Evans: Clause 3(5) states:

"The Secretary of State—

(a) may issue guidance to best value authorities generally or to one or more particular authorities;

(b) may issue different guidance to different authorities".

Clause 4(2) states:

"An order may specify different performance indicators or standards—

(a) for different functions;

(b) for different authorities;

(c) to apply at different times."

The Bill is extremely vague in parts and we have grave concerns. My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex talked about the Secretary of State's and the Welsh Assembly's 27 new powers. We have enormous reservations about the fact that those new powers will be held in reserve and could be used.

We have no qualms about the proper devolution of powers. I am talking not about local authorities but about individuals and institutions, such as schools, hospitals and general practitioners. But the reserve powers given to the Secretary of State by the Bill are not the enabling powers that we would wish to see and which we were promised at the general election for the reform of local government. I am not surprised that the Minister is already talking about amendments that she hopes will be made in Committee, because the Bill has not been properly thought through.

It is strange that local authorities are supposed to take instruction from Ministers who think that best value is flying around the country and the rest of Europe in private jets instead of taking scheduled airlines. Ministers can certainly see best value in houses in Islington; they may not have the money, but they know how to get it. How can local authorities take instruction from Ministers who do not show best value in government?

We need to hear a lot more about clause 17, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King)—about the pitfalls, the ticking time bomb and the abuses for which it could be used. At least competition policy meant that all local authorities had to follow strict guidelines so that abuses could not be committed, as in the past.

Part of the problem with local authority contracts was the over-politicisation of the way in which they were awarded. Clause 17 may be abused—perhaps not by the current Secretary of State or by the Welsh Assembly in its first 12 months—and that problem must be addressed. I cannot for the life of me see why we cannot address it in the Bill if we know, as the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, that many aspects are causing grave concern.

In respect of capping, the great question is, "When is capping not capping?" The answer is, "When it is new capping." The Secretary of State's reserve powers for new capping are enormous. The Bill puts local authorities in the dark, because it allows him, or the Welsh Assembly, to use capping powers after the event—if local authorities introduce excessive charges.

What are excessive charges? Is three times the rate of inflation an excessive council tax rise? If so, a number of local authorities will face the cap from the Government this year, because many charges will go up by 7 per cent. Indeed, there will be double-digit increases, so what does "excessive" mean?

Let us at least give a clue to local authorities, which have to set such charges. The Bill is far too vague: the Secretary of State is free to cap, or not to cap. Although the criteria that he chooses must obviously be the same for all local authorities, no one knows what they are. It will also be up to him to decide what "excessive" means.

There is fear in Wales that the new Welsh Assembly will usurp the powers of some local authorities. It has the power to distribute moneys passed on by central Government—using the Barnett formula, we are assured—but will its First Secretary or a Committee decide what "excessive" happens to be? A coalition could run the Welsh Assembly—not the Labour party, as it believes—so how would that work?

A number of concerns have been raised, not only by Conservative Members. *[Interruption.]* It is all very well for the Minister to smirk, but concerns have been

expressed by her own Back Benchers. The hon. Member for Bolton, North-East mentioned the advantages brought by CCT and the fact it can be harmful if power drifts away from those who are governed. I agree, not simply in respect of Westminster, but of Brussels.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) mentioned the discontinuity between the White Paper and the general election and the Bill. A number of people, including many in the local government sector, will be disappointed. The Local Government Association briefing mentions

"aspects of the detail which the Association will wish to scrutinise during the Bill's passage, in particular, the wide-ranging reserve powers proposed for the Secretary of State in applying Best Value and the new regime to regulate council tax; the provisions for inspection under Best Value, including existing inspectorates' roles; the provisions for contracting out in clause 16; and the criteria which will trigger the new capping powers in the Bill."

The association has reservations about virtually the entire Bill.

Dr. George Turner: The hon. Gentleman might at least have added that the LGA "broadly welcomes" the Bill. Should he not have quoted those words before proceeding to the association's qualifying remarks?

Mr. Evans: The fact is that, at the conclusion of its briefing, the association expresses a number of reservations about the Bill—the same reservations that we have heard throughout today's debate. While it may welcome some of the broad thrust of the legislation, it has enormous reservations. We would be wrong to ignore reservations expressed by representatives of local authorities throughout the country who came to the House today to make their concerns known, and to dismiss their views on the ground that they welcome some of the changes.

A number of other points were made. My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) spoke of the drift of power away from local government, and said how damaging that would be. We want to enable local government to become responsible to the electorate. Other hon. Members asked how we could make the electorate more interested in going out and voting in local elections. Certainly, we must do more to deal with that problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley, who has a long and distinguished history of service in local government, mentioned apathy. He too expressed reservations about clause 17, and spoke of the absurdity of capping below SSA. I hope that the Minister will deal with that when he winds up the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) spoke of getting back to fundamentals in government. We need many more changes. I understand that the Government are to produce more reforms, but there is great disappointment about the fact that they have begun with this measure when so many others could have been presented.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) mentioned the consultation process. We need to know a little more about that. When I was a county councillor in West Glamorgan, the council used to engage regularly in consultation with local businesses. Local business representatives would troop in, and would be listened to by councillors. The authority was, of course, Labour controlled. Out they would go; then the council would jack up the rates by 30 per cent. or 35 per cent., showing no concern whatever for the local businesses and no interest in where they would find the extra money. We need more detailed information about the procedure involved in the consultation. Guidelines are to be issued, but we do not know what they will be. As with so much in the Bill, we simply do not know.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish spoke of a smokescreen for further Government control, referring to fears about the Bill that we all share. He spoke of Whitehall's tendency to dictate what local government should do. The Bill will not release local government; it will not give local government far more control.

The hon. Member for Castle Point (Mrs. Butler) said that the consultation would increase confidence in local government, but I hope that what I have said about the procedure shows that, in many instances, consultation is a sham. If it is to be effective, it must take place in a meaningful way. Local authorities must listen to what local people say. Local people—not just representatives of organisations, but individuals—have an important voice, and local government must listen to them.

The Bill does not represent a third way; it is third rate. It does not set local authorities free; it puts fresh chains on them. In our view, this is "new Labour, new chains". The Bill does not give authorities predictability; it blindfolds them with the threat that, if they step out of line, they will be hit. It gives the Secretary of State, or the Welsh Assembly, enormous reserve powers. It is arbitrary in nature, unclear in presentation and unpredictable in practice. Rather than waving a wand to improve the functioning of local government, the Secretary of State will be waving a stick.

We were promised a great deal by the Government, but, as usual, their approach is piecemeal and ill defined. As the best effects of compulsory competitive tendering are ditched and the protection of capping abolished—or not, depending on the mood of the Secretary of State or the Welsh Assembly—only one thing is certain in the Bill: that council taxes will rise. There is no guarantee whatever that the services that people receive will improve.

The Government are torn between dogma and doubt. The one leads to the ditching of sensible proposals that protect the council tax payer, while the other leads to listing. Together, they have created a party at war with itself, a Cabinet besotted with position, not political direction, and a Government with their eye on each other, not on the ball. There is a price to be paid for incompetent government and, with the passage of the Bill, it will land on everyone's doormat. That is why we cannot and will not support the Bill tonight.

9.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): There is a price to be paid for incompetent government and the number of Conservative Members sitting opposite is witness and testament to that.

I agree with the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) that the debate has been interesting. It has convinced me of three things: first, that there is widespread support for bringing the services that are provided by local authorities in England and Wales up to the standards of the best in terms of both cost and quality;

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secondly, that if we are to deliver best value in full and improve local financial accountability, central Government need new powers and local government needs real flexibility; and thirdly, that those new powers need to be exercised with care, with broad agreement and for the benefit of local communities. I take heed of those hon. Members who have advocated caution.

The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) initially argued that there was widespread support for the continuation of compulsory competitive tendering, rather than best value. To substantiate that claim, he had to resort to quoting the much quoted Institute of Directors—not all the Institute of Directors; only 49 per cent. of it apparently. When he was told that the larger, more representative CBI supported the Government's position, one Conservative Member, who is no longer with us, remarked from a sedentary position that the CBI was merely a bunch of socialists. What could better demonstrate the pathetic and marginal nature of the current Tory party than the fact that it believes that the CBI is a bunch of socialists?

Later, Tory Members chose to have a philosophical debate with one another and very interesting it was too. The hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) made an interesting contribution that attracted considerable agreement from the Labour Benches because he attacked fundamentally the philosophy of the previous Government. However, he rather spoiled it by claiming, apparently, that Thatcherism was a disguised socialist plot to reintroduce central planning to Britain. However, I am grateful for the many helpful proposals that have been made in the debate.

It is a time of great change for Wales. The advent of the National Assembly heralds a new era of inclusive politics in which the people of Wales and their representatives will have to work together for the common good.

The Assembly will be no talking shop. It will have at its disposal the £7 billion or so budget that is currently assigned to the Welsh Office. The Assembly will allocate those resources and set policies and standards for services. In doing so, it will wish to work in close partnership with local government to deliver services that will meet the needs of the people of Wales.

It is my special privilege to turn to the provisions that deal with the National Assembly for Wales. Before the referendum, we promised that new Government Bills would reflect the position of the Assembly within the modernised British constitution and would confer on it powers consistent with those that it will inherit from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State later this year. The Bill is the first to do so.

Under the Bill, the Assembly will be able to decide how to exercise its powers to take forward the modernisation of Welsh local government in a way that reflects the special needs of Wales and the democratically expressed wishes of its people. That is the only way to go if the Assembly is to have the trust and respect it deserves. In that sense, the Bill paves the way for the shape of future primary legislation for Wales. Parliament should provide the framework within which the Assembly will operate, without seeking to be unduly prescriptive. I am delighted that the Bill does that and I commend it to the House as a new and refreshing means of delivering real power into the hands of a body that will exercise it in an open and accountable fashion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) asked about the role of the partnership council and its best value. It is one of the many areas in which the Assembly can discuss with local government how it is exercising its powers with respect to local authorities. He also asked about the position of police authorities in Wales. The Bill provides that the best value powers in respect of those authorities will be exercised by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Mr. Evans: Could clause 17 be used by the Welsh Assembly so as to use the Welsh language as a means by which contracts are handed out by local authorities?

Mr. Jones: The hon. Gentleman hails from Wales and he will know that that question is meant to be entirely mischievous. There is no possibility of a democratically elected body for Wales, where 80 per cent. of the population does not speak Welsh, doing such a thing. The hon. Gentleman should be ashamed of himself for trying to make mischief out of the real consensus that exists in Wales about the promotion of the Welsh language.

There has been concern from some hon. Members about the intervention powers in the Bill. The hon. Member for North Essex trumpeted the 27 new powers for the Secretary of State that he claims are contained in the Bill. He chose to ignore the fact that 50 powers introduced by the previous Administration will be repealed by the Bill. By my calculation, that means that the Bill represents a net reduction of 23 in centralising powers. The Bill removes powers from central Government. By contrast, the hon. Gentleman declares himself proud of the 28 pieces of local government legislation introduced by the Conservative party between 1980 and 1997.

Intervention in an authority's affairs by the Secretary of State or the Assembly will be appropriate to the nature of any failure. It will be the exception, not the rule. It will be the last resort.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): On that subject, may I draw the Minister's attention to a provision that is not repealed by the legislation—the disgraceful section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which purports to ban the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities, rather like purporting to ban the promotion of left-handedness? That has resulted in a failure to provide good sex education, the failure of pastoral care for young lesbian and gay pupils and other difficulties that schools in particular have had to face. Why did not the Government take the first opportunity to repeal that stain on our statute book?

Mr. Jones: The Government have a commitment to repeal that legislation before the end of this Parliament, but it is not a part of best value.

Some hon. Members have expressed concern about the apparently excessive powers that the Bill gives the Secretary of State and the Assembly to make orders and issue statutory guidance. The alternative would be to put more detail in the Bill. We do not believe that that would be the right way forward. Best value needs flexibility.

That can best be provided through secondary legislation and guidance. That is how we can take into account the experience of the pilots. It is how we can introduce changes at operational level as circumstances change.

The Opposition have failed to appreciate the fact that we have been discussing these powers with local government and others for over 18 months. Let me make it clear that the powers will be used with considerable care. They will be used after consultation and we will seek consensus in the way we use them. We are developing a protocol with the Local Government Association setting out the general principles that will underpin the exercise of the intervention powers and the broad procedures to be followed.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Minister undertake to make the protocol available before the Committee stage starts? It is impossible to discuss how the powers will be exercised when the Government are playing their cards so close to their chest.

Mr. Jones: The protocol will be made available as soon as it is agreed with the Local Government Association.

Some hon. Members have objected to clause 14. The powers are included in the Bill to help local authorities to deliver best value. We shall consult widely before using the powers. We shall look carefully at best value authorities' powers to trade and engage in partnerships.

We are also considering the ability to pool budgets with other public bodies to achieve common objectives. Such powers will have to be curtailed. We cannot create new monopolies. We shall not allow special advantages for authorities to trade in the market. The Secretary of State will be able to impose restrictions and conditions on the use of the powers. We shall ensure that risks are limited and public funds protected. The powers will remove the constraints that prevent authorities from delivering best value. That must be good for local people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) expressed concern about authorities drowning in Government performance indicators. Some aspects of local services are of national interest, such as levels of educational attainment or child protection. It is right for the Government to set standards to ensure a minimum level of such services. However, authorities will set a range of indicators to reflect their priorities. Those indicators will play a key role in the performance management framework. The Audit Commission has consulted on indicators and will continue to do so in the coming year.

The Bill is not about nationalising local government, as some Opposition Members have suggested. It provides local authorities with a framework to deliver effective and efficient local services for local people. Councils will be held to account for their delivery of services. The duties to publish annual performance plans and to consult service users and others will be key mechanisms in making that happen. The Bill is not about nationalisation; it is about enabling local government to do its job better.

The Conservatives were also concerned that the Bill says nothing about how competition will work under best value. They do not believe that best value will provide real competition. We recognise that competition will be an important part of best value. In each review, authorities will need to test the competitiveness of each service. In our White Papers we have identified a number of ways in which that can be done. There will be competition, but unlike under compulsory competitive tendering, it will be fair, based on the principle of partnership and in a climate of respect for employees' rights. If local authorities seek to evade or fudge competitiveness, it will be apparent in the quality or cost of their services and will be picked up by the audit. There is nowhere to hide.

I greatly appreciated the arguments against CCT made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead). I am indebted to him for revealing to me the case of the Barnet duck. I assure him that under best value Barnet ducks will grow fat.

Equity has been referred to during the debate. It is inherent in best value. An effective authority will ensure that it is built into the review process and underpins the local performance plan. Many local authorities are addressing that already. There is no need for a specific mention in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) asked how we would use the experience of the pilot areas to draw up secondary legislation and guidance. The pilot studies are being widely assessed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I receive regular reports. We both have a pilots steering group and working groups which bring together the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Council, the Audit Commission, the Local Government Association and the voluntary sector. We have not set up all those pilots and engaged all that expertise only to ignore them. It is to take account of the experience of the pilots that we have left some flexibility in the Bill as to how we implement the details of the framework.

We were elected on a manifesto that promised that we would retain a reserve power to control excessive council tax increases. It is right for central Government to take a responsible interest in the responsible use of local authority powers. In England, only 25 per cent. of local government finance is raised locally and in Wales the figure is even lower. We have to be accountable to the national taxpayer, but we also need to protect local taxpayers, and we will.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Jones: No. I am trying to refer to as many points as possible.

We shall do so, however, in a more flexible and discriminating fashion. Those who are criticising the reserve powers are looking at them in isolation and not as part of a wider package of local government reform to which the Government are committed. That package of reform is providing local accountability and responsibility. Indeed, we hope that the other changes that have been proposed as part of the review of local government finance will mean that the reserve power is used rarely if at all.

In conclusion, modern local government is a vital part of the fabric of the dynamic, democratic, fair and inclusive society that people want and it is vital to securing the quality of life that people deserve and have a right to expect. We recognise that modernising local government will take time and will be demanding on all concerned. Some of our reforms will require wide

[Mr. Jones]

consultation before they can be introduced, in recognition of the radical and important nature of those changes for local government and the local people it serves.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) was cynical about the value of consultation. We should expect no more from a former Conservative local government Minister. The hon. Member for North Essex welcomed the idea of beacon councils, and my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) called for local business rates. Our White Paper contains proposals for improvements in those areas and many more, on which we are currently in discussion with the Local Government Association, local government and other parties before conducting wider public consultation on the way forward.

The current Local Government Bill is the first step. Among all our public institutions, councils have a special status as local, directly elected bodies. They are able to make things happen on the ground—where it really matters. Together, the changes will renew the framework for local government, opening up the way for councils to meet the challenges and needs of the 21st century.

The Government do not believe that it is right that local people should have to put up with poor services and high local taxes. They need a voice that will be heard. Authorities need to respond to that voice, and to take pride in the way in which they respond.

Too often under the previous Administration the drive to cut costs in service delivery overrode all other considerations. Dogma prevailed and users of local authority services took a back seat. I have to acknowledge that local authority performance in the delivery of services is still patchy—with some achieving high standards and others not.

Best value represents a fresh start for all councils and a way forward into the new millennium. There is a hunger in local government to meet the challenges of the new millennium. The Bill will enable that, and I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 35, Noes 341.

Division No. 30] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Chidgey, David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Adrian Sanders and Mr. Donald Gorrie.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Coventry NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin

Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Hill and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading):—

The House divided: Ayes 334, Noes 170.

Division No. 31] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith

Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Hill and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Casin, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim

Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL [*MONEY*]:

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Local Government Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums so payable under any other enactment;

(b) any expenses of the Secretary of State under the Act.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That—

(i) at its sitting on Monday 1st February, the Scottish Grand Committee shall take questions for oral answer; and

(ii) in respect of that sitting, paragraph (5) of Standing Order No. 94 (Scottish Grand Committee (questions for oral answer)) shall have effect with the substitution of the word "nine" for the word "ten".—*[Mr. Allen.]*

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Dawn Primarolo be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Mrs. Barbara Roche be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Local Government Finance (Buckinghamshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

10.26 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The parliamentary day began with questions to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and we continued with the Second Reading debate on the Local Government Bill. I shall conclude tonight's proceedings by raising the crucial issue of the local government finance settlement for Buckinghamshire and its implications. I am delighted to do so in the company of my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) and, last but not least, for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney)—all of whom represent Buckinghamshire constituencies and share my concern about the prospective fate of the county council's finances.

The reality is that although, nationally, the revenue support grant settlement might appear to many people to be reasonable, locally in Buckinghamshire it is undoubtedly a bad deal, bad news and is being badly received. As a result of the Government's announcement, the average increase in social services standard spending assessments this year is 5.8 per cent, but Buckinghamshire is due to receive only 2.8 per cent., or £1.5 million. Yet the authority calculates that, in order to retain existing service levels, an increase of 9 per cent.—or £5.5 million—is required. Therefore, we are immediately faced with a shortfall of £4 million.

That shortfall is exacerbated by the Government's regrettable decision this year not to roll forward to the financial year 1999–2000 the £2.5 million in special transitional grant. If that sum of money were rolled forward—as we wished and expected—it would be possible for Buckinghamshire county council both to take on and to pay for long-term care commitments. The threat to that process is a matter of genuine and cross-party concern.

My hon. Friends and I welcome the Government's proposed new grants for promoting independence. I say that without hesitation to the Minister. As yet, the conditions attached to the use of those grants are unclear, and we expect an announcement on that point by the end of January. I simply observe to the Minister and the House that, if the Government allow flexibility in the use of those grants so that Buckinghamshire, for example, can use them to pay for long-term care commitments, the local authority will have more flexibility in setting its council tax level.

If, however, there is not an announcement soon, or if the Government announce that they will not allow flexibility in the use of those independence-promoting grants, Buckinghamshire county council will be in a serious quandary. It will have to decide how to bridge the £6.5 million gap. It can do so only by raising council tax or by underfunding education.

This year, as a result of an especially severe financial settlement, the county is not spending at the level of its full education standard spending assessment, for fear that if it did so, intolerable damage would be inflicted on other services provided by the county. Next year, Buckinghamshire county council intends to spend at the full education SSA, as the Government intend, as parents and teachers wish and as the needs of our children demand. However, Buckinghamshire also wants to retain the level of social services provision.

On present reckoning, if there is not better news from central Government, Buckinghamshire county council concludes that a budget of £329 million will be required, necessitating an increase in council tax of 13.9 per cent. That is undesirable. Whether it is unavoidable is not yet clear. I hope that the Under-Secretary will be gracious enough in his reply to acknowledge that if the county council were forced to make that increase, £1.5 million of the revenue raised would go to the standards fund, £1.5 million would go to secondary schools and £400,000 would be devoted to the reduction of class sizes at key stage 2. That would be welcomed by hundreds of parents and teachers who have written to me on the subject, not least those representing the Edlesborough county combined school and the Cheddington county combined school, which are confronted by class sizes of 47 and 43.

Of course, the situation is unsatisfactory and we should prefer a better alternative. In pursuit of such an alternative, a cross-party delegation of county councillors came to see the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) on Tuesday 5 January. To his credit, the hon. Gentleman gave a courteous hearing to the delegation, for which I thank him and for which I know all the councillors were grateful.

The delegation consisted of five county councillors. It was led by the chairman of the council, Ken Ross. It included David Shakespeare, the chairman of policy and resources; Mark Greenburgh, the leader of the Conservative group on the council, who is listening intently to the debate; Councillor Pam Crawford, the leader of the Liberal Democrat group; and Councillor John Huddart, the leader of the Labour group. It was greatly assisted by an admirable duo of officials: the chief executive of the county council, Ian Crookall, and the head of finance, Sean Nolan.

It is important to understand that the delegation was cross-party and sentiments were expressed in a non-partisan fashion. Councillor Crawford said:

"It was important to explain the full impact of the loss of grant for Social Services . . . there are real pressures on the budget for older people. It is vital that we meet the pressures on old people's and children's services."

To his credit, Councillor Huddart said:

"The cross-party delegation demonstrates everyone's commitment to protecting our services."

Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors, as I hope the Under-Secretary will acknowledge, are in touch with, concerned about and determined to promote the interests of their constituents. To that end, they have reached a consensus on the proposals that the county has made.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): As a former member of Buckinghamshire county council, on which I had the misfortune to serve a few years ago, I am confused by the hon. Gentleman's comments. Perhaps he can enlighten me. When the disaggregation between

Buckinghamshire county council and Milton Keynes occurred, there was a discrepancy in the favour of the county—some say of £5 million, some say of £7 million or £8 million—which the then chairman of policy and resources, David Shakespeare, agreed should go to Milton Keynes. For the want of it being in writing, it would have done. That means that Buckinghamshire has had a higher standard spending assessment for the past two or three years. I do not understand how the hon. Gentleman can make such comments without addressing that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. That is quite enough.

Mr. Bercow: I blame myself, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Invariably, as my hon. Friends will testify, my generosity in the House gets the better of me. First, if the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) wants to pursue the question of the future borrowing powers and financial arrangements of Milton Keynes unitary authority, he is welcome to do so with his hon. Friend the Under-Secretary. Secondly, it is a trifle cheeky for him to criticise the record of Buckinghamshire county council and my support for it, given that this year Buckinghamshire county council is spending only 0.3 per cent. under its education SSA, whereas Milton Keynes, as he knows to his discredit—apparently he supports this arrangement—is spending 8.9 per cent. less than its education SSA. That is a matter for him, his conscious, his party and his hon. Friend the Under-Secretary.

Buckinghamshire county council is a good, prudent, well-run authority. It is committed to the principle and practice of best value. Already, it is achieving savings of £2 million a year as a result of outsourcing. On top of that—I hope that the Under-Secretary will take note—it is conducting a rolling programme of root-and-branch reviews of all its services. That has already yielded annual savings of £800,000, and savings of a further £2.5 million per year is earmarked for future years. In addition, the council has frozen infrastructure expenditure in cash terms, realising a saving to the authority of £1.6 million a year. It is a good authority; it is doing all that it can to provide quality services at affordable prices on behalf of the people whom it exists to serve.

The Government's position on capping is not altogether clear. I hope that the Under-Secretary might enlighten us in his reply. In his statement on 2 December 1998, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions referred several times to excessive council tax increases, for which he said there would be no justification, and which he would not hesitate to intervene to prevent. Unfortunately, he has not divulged to the world what constitutes excessive; he simply will not say. That has created an absurd game of cat and mouse.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Bercow: It is an unsatisfactory guessing game, as the hon. Gentleman rightly agrees. I hope that the Under-Secretary, who is an intelligent man, will concede that it does not make sense to operate on that basis, given that if a decision made by the council is wrong and it is capped against its expectation, it will have to re-bill. That would cost Buckinghamshire £500,000. That is not sensible. Let us know the ground rules and operate according to them.

Of one thing we can be certain: whatever consultation the Government have undertaken, Buckinghamshire county council has consulted. It has surveyed residents, staff and stakeholders. It has issued consultation documents on its proposals and had a healthy and supportive response to them. It has staged a series of briefing meetings for people with a particular interest in the subject. As a result, beyond doubt, the message is this: we support the council's priorities, we want the services to continue, we are prepared to pay the cost for them.

I conclude on behalf of my hon. Friends by making two requests of the Under-Secretary. First, in the name of quality service provision and for the sake of the health of local democracy, will the Under-Secretary speedily clarify whether there will be flexibility in the new independence grants that are to be provided and, if so, what form that and flexibility will take? Secondly, will he trust the democratically locally elected politicians who are the custodians of the local interest and are charged with effectively representing it? If he gives them the chance, they will do the job, and they will not let their local residents down.

10.40 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and to the Minister for allowing me to intervene briefly in the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his success in obtaining a debate on this important subject.

I shall make three points. First, I remind the Minister that in each of the local government settlements that the Government have announced since the general election, they have transferred money away from Buckinghamshire to other areas of the country through changes in the standard spending assessment formula. That has created difficulties for a council that is already run economically and prudently, and whose electors are accustomed to the level of services that it provides.

Secondly, the decision by the Government this year not to roll forward the special transitional grant for social services into the standard spending assessment for 1999-2000 was unprecedented in the years since the new system for funding social services was first established. We in the House all know that the care of the elderly, the learning disabled and other vulnerable people involves a long-term commitment by the social services department of a local authority. It cannot be switched on in one financial year and switched off the next because of an sudden, unheralded, unforeseen and unprecedented change in the Government's policy.

I very much regret that the Government chose to make such a switch in policy and I hope that Ministers will consider allowing flexibility of the sort that my hon. Friend called for. If they do not do so, there is a real threat to services such as the Princes Risborough day centre in my constituency, the Endeavour day centre in Chesham, which serves the constituents of my hon. Friends the Members for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) and for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), and day centres in High Wycombe that serve the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney).

Short of cutting social services, there are only two ways in which the county council can compensate for the regrettable change in the Government's policy. One is to increase the council tax severely in a way that would

[Mr. David Lidington]

inevitably bear hardest on those people on pensions or fixed incomes. The second is to reduce planned spending on education in a way that would also be unwelcome.

Finally, I reiterate my hon. Friend's call for the Government to make clear their criteria for capping. The opaque way in which they hold out the prospect of capping retrospectively after councils have set their budgets will make for bad budgetary planning and a lack of accountability of councillors to their electors. Every political party represented on my county council wants the Government to think again, and I hope that even now the Minister is prepared to do so.

10.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on his success in securing the debate and giving us the opportunity to consider the provisional local government settlement for Buckinghamshire in the coming financial year.

The local government settlement is an issue of considerable interest to local authorities. Today, we came to the end of the consultation period on the proposals that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 2 December. Many local authorities, including Buckinghamshire, as the hon. Gentleman observed, have made representations on the settlement and have sent representatives to see Ministers to press their case. I can assure the House that, before we take final decisions, we will carefully consider all the comments made on our proposals, including those made by the representatives of Buckinghamshire and those made by hon. Members in this evening's debate. We expect to be able to announce the final settlement early next month.

I will comment later on the settlement and what it means for Buckinghamshire, but I should put the comments made by the hon. Gentleman in context.

We have provided the best settlement for seven years. We have provided a 5.4 per cent. increase for councils total revenue spending. That is an additional £2.6 billion and provides local authorities with a real increase of 2.9 per cent. I am confident that local authorities will continue to produce more efficiency savings as they continue to modernise. Therefore, the increases that we have provided will provide even greater headroom above inflation.

The English settlement provides an extra 7.2 per cent. or £1.4 billion for education, on top of the extra £5.4 billion that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced that we would be providing over three years for capital investment in modernising our schools.

Council tax payers will have also been pleased to note that we are not expecting them to pick up the tab for this extra expenditure. We have allowed for an extra £2 billion of Government grant, so that council tax bears only its fair share of additional spending. That provides that, if local authorities increase their budgets in line with SSAs, council taxes will rise by 4.5 per cent. on average—I appreciate that, within this figure, there will be variations between authorities. I will come on to that point later.

Personal social services receive an extra £500 million or 6.1 per cent. in cash terms as part of the Government's new approach to social services. That is a 3.6 per cent. increase in real terms. We are increasing resources by more than 3 per cent. a year in real terms, on average, over the years 1999–2000 to 2002–03.

I am sure that authorities in Buckinghamshire will recognise that this is a good settlement and that they have benefited from it. As always, authorities are affected to a lesser or greater extent by the changes made to the distribution of Government grant.

Last year, we announced a number of changes to the SSA formulae to make them fairer. This year, we have made more changes to SSAs, where those are justified and will lead to a fairer system.

We have specifically made changes to the children's social services formula. The new formula has been introduced following detailed research, mainly undertaken at York university, which has been the subject of thorough and detailed discussion with local government. The analysis used to develop the formula reflects the pattern of service costs since the Children Act 1989, and includes details of all types of children in touch with social services.

The formula includes plausible factors influencing the need to spend and uses a statistical method which ensures that results are not biased by historic levels of funding. The new formula for children's social services provides a better indication of need and a fairer allocation of grant among authorities than the previous one.

All the major criticisms of the formula have been fully investigated. We did not introduce it in last year's settlement because there were doubts which required further examination, and that examination has taken place in the intervening year. As a result, a fostering cost adjustment has been developed to allow for the uneven costs of foster care across England.

Although standard spending assessments for some authorities are reduced as a result of that change, we have ensured that no authority will receive less grant from the Government in 1999–2000 than it did in 1998–99.

We have also introduced changes which make allowance for the additional cost of providing social services for the elderly in their own homes in rural areas and, for the next financial year, the distribution of grant will take account of deprivation in the part of the formula that deals with what are called county services, such as libraries and probation.

However, we have not made other changes which were suggested to us. Despite extensive discussions with local government, no clear-cut improvements could be identified on issues such as the area cost adjustment and the additional educational needs SSA. We were pressed to make changes on those, but we did not do so because we did not believe that they would be justified.

Many authorities in the south-east were concerned about possible changes on those issues and made

representations to us. We accepted that none of the proposals that we had before us represented a clear improvement on the existing system, so we have left that part of the formula unchanged.

We will continue to seek ways of making the system fairer, and we have launched a long-term, three-year research programme to try to find a fairer, more robust, simpler and more stable way of distributing grant. That is the biggest challenge in local government finance, because the demands of fairness on one side and simplicity on the other are not easily reconciled. We have an extremely complex system, which many people think is not as fair as it should be. The challenge over the next three years will be to achieve a system that is more comprehensible to ordinary people and that also achieves the objectives of fairness.

As we said in our July White Paper, we do not expect to change the SSA formula over the next three years. That will allow a period of stability for local government, and for the research, to find out whether we can come up with different ways of distributing grant.

We also announced SSA totals for three years in the comprehensive spending review. Those may change slightly, to reflect changes in local government's functions and responsibilities. Apart from those, there will be no changes, so the new approach will allow local government to plan ahead on a firm basis—for three years—for the first time. That can be only good news for councils and council tax payers alike.

We believe that the changes to SSAs are fair, but councils need time to adjust their spending levels. As in previous years, we will pay grant to limit the effect on council tax payers where changes in the way that we calculate SSAs lead to significant loss, but over and above that, we will ensure that no local authority receives less Government grant than last year. There will therefore be no losers, which means that there is no case for large council tax increases.

We were elected on a manifesto commitment to end crude and universal capping. However, we promised to retain a reserve power to control excessive council tax increases. The new reserve powers are set out in the Local Government Bill, which was debated today. The Government have a strong interest in local government taxation and spending decisions and must have reserve powers, which will enable them to limit excessive council tax increases and so protect local taxpayers.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. Time is very short and I want to deal specifically with Buckinghamshire, which I know is a matter of concern.

We hope that the other changes proposed as part of the review of local government finance will mean that the reserve power has to be used rarely, if at all. Local government knows that this is a matter of trust: if it fails to deliver prudent budgets, or if efficiency and economy fall short of the standards that people expect, we will use our reserve powers.

Until the new legislation comes into effect, we will use existing powers as a reserve power to limit excessive council tax increases. We have not announced capping principles in advance, but we will still be prepared to use the powers to limit excessive budgets once set, to protect local taxpayers. We will decide whether we need to use our capping powers and what criteria will apply once authorities have set their budgets.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) urged me to announce the criteria in advance. That is not a sensible approach. It would apply a mechanistic formula in which there would be a perverse incentive for authorities to increase budgets to the limit. That is not a sensible way forward. We have made it clear that we will use the reserve power only when we believe that authorities have not acted responsibly.

We expect authorities to approach their budgeting within a responsible framework and to do so in the spirit that the hon. Member for Buckingham mentioned. He insisted that authorities should be free to decide the appropriate level. We expect them to do so with proper concern for prudence and responsibility.

We are providing significant real increases in funding from Government grants and the business rate, and the provisional settlement sets out how those resources will be distributed. Local authorities should carefully consider their needs in the light of that settlement when drawing up spending plans. We are not a tax-and-spend Government, and we expect authorities to act responsibly as well.

The standard spending assessment for Buckinghamshire will increase by 4.5 per cent. The hon. Member for Buckingham would have to look back as far as 1993–94 to find a bigger increase. Indeed, the average increase for Buckinghamshire between 1993–94 and now has been barely 2 per cent. a year. Buckinghamshire's increase this year is well above the rate of inflation, which shows our commitment to improving local services. An education increase of 5.4 per cent. shows our commitment to education in particular.

The hon. Member for Buckingham mentioned the difficulties faced by Buckinghamshire's social services. The county has received an extra £1.5 million in its personal social services SSA. In its representation on the provisional local government finance settlement, the council expressed its disappointment that the Government had not rolled forward the special transitional grant into next year's SSA. The hon. Gentleman raised that matter in his speech. However, to adjust in that way would make no sense in the light of the comprehensive spending review, which started from a zero base, looking at expenditure needs in the round. The only fair comparison involves looking at the total resources provided for social services. In Buckinghamshire's case, the amount of grant from the Department of Health in 1999–2000 is increasing compared with the figure in 1998–99. When added to the SSA, it provides a 2.8 per cent. increase, which is above the expected rate of inflation and far more than the total SSA allocation to Buckinghamshire in any of the past four years.

The comprehensive spending review has brought about a completely new approach to the way in which money is allocated to local government—over a longer period, in order to provide stability and predictability, and with more focus on outcomes. We accept that some new clients are

[Mr. Raynsford]

still coming into the system—albeit a diminishing number—as a result of the community-care changes of 1993. There is more than sufficient funding within the social services settlement to meet the costs of previous—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at four minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 13 January 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

9.33 am

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am grateful that you, Madam Speaker, have chosen for our first Wednesday morning debate of the new year the extremely topical subject of pay and conditions for nurses, midwives and health visitors. Out there in the country, a lot of people will be pleased that we have been given this opportunity for such a debate.

First, may I perform the usual courtesy of welcoming the Minister, who has a great opportunity? In one speech, he could guarantee a successful career and make himself popular with the whole country, hugely popular with the health service and entirely popular with hon. Members on both sides of the House. I look to him to rise to an unparalleled occasion. I shall give him a few prompts and hope that he will respond appropriately.

As hon. Members know, in a couple of weeks, the pay review body will recommend what should be paid to nursing staff, midwives and health visitors for the coming year. The Secretary of State for Health said the other day that the country faces a crisis in the health service. The Royal College of Nursing, also in the past few days, has said that the crisis in terms of shortage of nurses in the health service is the worst for a quarter of a century. Midwives say that the number of registered midwives has fallen by 2,500 over the past five years, and that the number of registered and practising midwives is lower than at any time this decade.

I am conscious that the debate is about only some of the people who work in the health service. We could have had a debate a wide-ranging debate about all NHS employees. May I allay their concerns and possible jealousy? We pay tribute to all those who work directly for the health service or are contracted to it. Although I shall concentrate on the largest group in the health service, I hope that—if you are generous, Madam Speaker—we will soon be able to debate the other two large groups, which also have pay review bodies and have their futures determined in the same way: the professions allied to medicine—chiropodists, dieticians, occupational therapists, orthoptists, physiotherapists and radiographers—and related grades and, of course, doctors and dentists. I am conscious that they, equally, play a part in the team, as do those who are not yet covered by the review body procedure, such as psychologists and psychiatrists.

We are grateful to all those people, but it seemed appropriate to debate nurses, midwives and health visitors, not only because they are the largest group, but because they are the group which manifests the most severe problems of recruitment and retention. It is vital to the future of the health service that we find solutions to those problems.

The national health service employs slightly fewer than 1 million people, which makes it by far the largest employer in the country. The review body considers workers in Scotland, England and Wales and recommends for the three countries together. We are discussing the futures of about 750,000 people in these professions. Interestingly, and perhaps relevantly, about 80 per cent. of them are women. As a man, I must say that, had the gender balance in the health service been different during the 50 years of its existence, wages for nurses, midwives and other health workers would not be relatively as low. Everybody in the health service should be paid appropriately, especially those who often have the larger caring and outside-work responsibilities.

The latest available figures show that there are about 600,000 practitioners on the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting register, but they also show a lot of alarming trends. I shall spend a couple of moments discussing the background statistics before coming to the argument and where we go from here.

The statistics show that the number of people available, on the list and qualified to work has gone down by about 2 per cent. in the past year, which is the biggest annual decline ever reported. People in the professions are also aging rapidly. We all age rapidly, but the profile of people in these groups is changing significantly. Fewer than one in seven is under 30, and more than one in eight is 55 or over and eligible for retirement. The trend looks unhelpful, because, within about 10 years, a fifth of all nurses will be over 50 and retirements are likely to increase from about 5,000 a year to about 10,000.

That means that we must replace those at one end of the health service who are leaving because of age, but, unhelpfully, we do not appear to have the numbers coming in at the other end. The number of people coming on to the register has fallen by more than a third—from about 19,000 a year to about 12,000—and we have lost a third of that number in the past 12 months. Thus, recruitment has declined over the past 10 years but the last big decline has been in the past year.

Not surprisingly, we have had to look abroad for people to help the health service. Although that issue has been well publicised, we are talking about small numbers—of more than 500,000 employees, only some 4,500 people from overseas work in our health service. We cannot, therefore, hope to rescue the NHS by bringing people from overseas.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Is my hon. Friend aware of a recent survey that shows that at least a third of nurses work two weeks' unpaid overtime a year just to keep the national health service going? Is that not an appalling indictment of the Government's record as an employer, especially given that they continually promote policies on fairness at work?

Mr. Hughes: There are many anomalies, of which that is one. Another is that many nurses and midwives are paid a lower hourly rate for overtime. That goes against normal practice.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): It would not do Rover much good.

Mr. Hughes: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. If NHS employees have the option of staying with their current employer and being paid less than the normal hourly rate or going to an agency and being hired back to do the same work at time and a half, the incentive to stay with the NHS is extremely small.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) is absolutely right: there is a huge amount of unpaid overtime. There is also a huge amount of inadequately paid overtime. Those people are expected to do overtime, as many wards cannot cope without it. If we are to keep the work force at its current size, we need 20,000 to 25,000 new nurses and midwives a year, so we must have more pre-registration people as well.

It would be easy for an Opposition spokesman simply to apportion blame, but that does little good. Whatever the history of trends in recruitment, we need to get out of the hole in which we find ourselves. I want to use this debate to encourage people, and unashamedly to put pressure on the Minister and the Government not just to recognise the crisis but to seize what may be the only great opportunity remaining in this Parliament. Health service workers have been let down badly twice in the past two years—first under the previous Government, then under this Government. For the past three years, the pay review body has been asked to do its work and has come up with proposals, and the Government have said that the proposals cannot be implemented—certainly not altogether.

Nothing undermines the morale of people who are not even on average earnings more than being told that those in the private sector and other jobs will move ahead while they must stay at the same level or move backwards. The relative reduction in earnings and take-home pay has been unacceptable, and it would be a tragic mistake if the Government were to stage the pay review body's recommendations again. I call on the Government to say today that they will implement the recommendations in full from 1 April.

Last year, the Secretary of State apologised later in the year that he had had to stage the pay increases. Apologies are fine as far as they go, but they do not make up for £250 less pay in the pocket. My colleagues who deal with Treasury matters have confirmed that the country can afford to make that commitment. It would be a false economy not to pay health service staff what they deserve. If we do not pay them now, we shall not have a health service up to the job in the future, and the long-term cost to the economy will be far higher.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the cut in nurses' pay is leading employer bodies to appoint nursing auxiliaries—people who would love to be in the nursing profession—and money is being saved by taking on people at another level?

Mr. Hughes: That is also true. The hon. Gentleman is knowledgeable about these matters. Although the pay review body's recommendations do not apply to Northern Ireland, and the staffing crisis is less great in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom, it is imperative that we continue to recruit and retain staff in Northern Ireland, many of whom have come to rescue the health service in the rest of the United Kingdom, where they enter other grades and often find a better salary reward.

I want to show the effect in cash terms of staging. In the past two years, a grade 2 clinical nurse has lost £248 as a result of staging. Last year, an award of 3.8 per cent. was made, but only 2 per cent. was paid in April and the rest was not paid until December. The rise did not keep pace with the cost of living. The Government are trying to con people by saying that it is all right if the pay increase keeps pace with the target rate of inflation. That is not the real inflation rate. The minimum that the Government must do is pay the real inflation rate—let alone make up for the money that was not paid last year.

In case the Minister says that it is all very well for Liberal Democrats to say that, but it is a huge sum of money, I remind him that the difference would have been £111 million and that the NHS budget is some £45 billion. If that was not money worth spending, we do not know what is. The Government have a huge reserve and could have afforded to pay in full last April. The Liberal Democrats said before, during and after the review that they should have paid, and the country made it abundantly clear in every opinion poll that nurses, midwives and health visitors, and others in similar professions, should have been paid a decent wage. In one respect it is too late, but in another there is still an opportunity.

May I do something slightly unusual and pay tribute to the national, regional and local press, which, over the past year, has clearly understood this issue better than the Government? It is unusual for Liberal Democrats—or other parties, for that matter—to pay tribute to the tabloid press, but *The Express*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Mirror* have consistently argued the case for health service employees to be paid better. They do so because they realise that a large proportion of their readership and the population at large want the health service to succeed. The NHS has lost 140,000 nurses in the past three years and there are some 12,000 nursing and 1,000 midwifery vacancies, so the press's interest has not been out of keeping.

The Liberal Democrats have seven simple-to-express elements of policy on pay and conditions. The issue is complex in many senses because of the complexity of each profession, grading structures, promotion and career development, training, overtime and local discretion. It would be wrong to seek to second-guess the pay review body's recommendations or make detailed proposals for each grade and profession. We shall value the pay review body's work this year as we have for more than a decade. It does an extremely good job and we are grateful for it. However, it is not difficult to reduce what needs to be done to some core propositions. Five of the seven proposals relate to what the Government should do now in terms of payment, and two relate to procedure.

First, whatever the pay review body recommends must be agreed—at least. Perhaps we need to agree to more. Secondly, there must be immediate, not staged, payment. Thirdly, we must put more money on the table to encourage people to enter the health service. When people are deciding on a career, and deciding which degree to study for, they sometimes consider the pay that they will receive once they have attained the qualification. People often realise that entering the health service is now a very

good option. If the Government announced in the spring an increase in bursaries, it would make a considerable difference in persuading people to enter the health service rather than other professions.

Fourthly, we ought to reward those who have stayed in the health service. A loyalty payment, a bonus or a back payment of the money that should have been paid last year or the year before—not a huge amount, but something in the hand that said, "Thank you for sticking with us through hard times; things are getting better and we realise it"—would be much appreciated. Fifthly, about 70,000 professionals who have left the health service but remained in the country and are not past retirement age would, given the right encouragement, return to work in the service. We ought to pay them an incentive to return. We should pay more to those who enter the health service, more to those who stay in it, and more to those who return.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I declare an interest, as my wife is a nurse. One issue that is often overlooked in seeking to retain, recruit and encourage the re-entry of nurses into the profession is the cost to nurses of training and retraining. They are treated as if they were highly paid professionals. Will my hon. Friend comment on the fact that nurses often have to undertake training in their own time and at their own expense? In effect, they are being asked to pay for the right to be poorly paid, which adds insult to injury.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who knows more about that issue than most. I, too, declare a slight interest, because people in my office have spoken to my hon. Friend's wife over the past couple of days to check what is going on in nursing in rural areas, to ensure that we are not just picking up information from inner-city constituencies. The situation that my hon. Friend describes is a scandal. I know of no other profession in which one is expected to retrain in one's own time or, effectively, at one's own expense. We are short of 12,000 nurses and desperate for people such as my hon. Friend's wife to work for the health service, yet we tell them that we will not pay them to get back up to speed if they want to return. That is not acceptable, and would not be in any other profession.

My hon. Friends and I have put on the table two procedural but important propositions about the way in which this place should deal with public sector pay reviews. First, in the past—I understand why—pay review body recommendations have gone to the Prime Minister, then the Chancellor and have been finally decided by the Cabinet. The House has never had an opportunity to decide such matters. We vote willingly on our own pay, but are never given the chance to vote on key public sector pay—whether it be of the armed forces, teachers, senior officials such as judges, or people who work in the health service.

Liberal Democrat Members are clear that, whatever the pay review body's recommendations, they should never be turned down unless Parliament agrees. If we are all asked to go through the Lobby in favour of or against the recommendation of a pay review body, the views of the country will be far more clearly reflected than if the Government take a possibly partisan decision which often favours the short-term economic interest as opposed to the long-term interest of the nation.

From the spring, there will be a Parliament in Edinburgh and assemblies in Cardiff and Belfast. We shall have four health services, accountable to local representatives. We have always believed that the health service should be more accountable. Therefore, logically, the pay review body should report to the Parliament in Edinburgh and the assemblies in Cardiff and Belfast, as well as to this place, so that what is right for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England can be decided by the people in those places on the basis of the particular facts. Different recruitment and retention problems and different mixes of professions need different solutions.

Although there are expert groups on nurses, midwives and health visitors, no one has ever compared their pay with that of cleaners or trust chairs. People who chair trust boards, who receive £120,000 a year, have had large pay increases. Yet, at the bottom of the scale, people have ended up on £12,000 a year following pay increases of 2.5 per cent. We take the very strong view that the health service will work together and feel like a team only when everybody's pay is considered collectively and seen to be fair.

We all know—it is almost trite to say—that the United Kingdom spends 5.8 per cent. of its gross domestic product on the public health service and about 6.9 per cent. on health care in total. We are halfway up the league table of European Union countries in public spending on health care, and 13th out of the 15 in total spending. The public are saying to us very loudly, "We want to spend more on the health service." We cannot divorce the pressure for better pay from the fact that the public are willing the health service to receive more. A huge majority of people believe that we need to spend more of our national wealth on our national health.

Health professionals have a good case when they say that, as they are frontline workers who do life-or-death jobs, it is reasonable that their pay should be compared with that of people who do similarly important public service jobs, and with the average wage of the work force as a whole. Last year, while a grade D clinical nurse was paid £12,635, a fire fighter's starting salary was £14,500, and a police officer's and a qualified ambulance worker's £15,500. A teacher's starting salary, at more than £13,000, was also higher than that of a nurse, midwife or health visitor. The average wage was more than £20,000, and the average graduate starting salary—now, all nurses are graduates—was about £16,500.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the pay of a nurse or midwife has slipped from about three quarters of average pay to much nearer half. I do not think the country thinks that that is acceptable. We must restore the status that is recognised by pay. It is no good saying, as the Government are saying to teachers, that people are very important, while not giving them the money in order that they may do their important job properly.

I do not want to go into the details of the practices to which my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives alluded, but it nonsensical that nurses should be better off leaving the health service and then returning for regular part-time agency work. That is undermining the health service. However good such agency nurses or midwives may be, they are not part of the team, do not know the patients in the same way and are not present all the time. Everyone in the health service agrees that the doubling of reliance on agency nurses, which was corroborated in figures in a

[Mr. Hughes]

written answer to me just before Christmas, is an unacceptable trend which ought to be ended—let alone the practices of training in one's own time and the like.

The Government keep on saying that if staff are given more money, there will be less for patient care.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): What are staff for?

Mr. Hughes: Indeed. Patient care can be delivered only if staff are available: it is not a case of either/or. Wages are a significant part of the health service's budget because a large number of staff are needed to deliver high-quality care. There are two components to the staff issue: we need both enough staff and high-quality staff. If we have both, good patient care can be provided in pretty grim conditions. Buildings can be dire, but if equipment and staff are up to the job, people's lives can be saved and the quality of their lives significantly improved.

I hope that, in this Parliament, we do not experience the dishonesty that we experienced twice in the last Parliament. In the last Parliament, the Government said, "We will act on the pay recommendations, but the money will have to come out of existing budgets: we will not give you any more." The same has often been done in the case of teachers. Local authorities have been told that they can pay teachers more, but will have far less money for other purposes as a result.

I am afraid that the Government have already perpetrated a fiddle. In November, the then Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn)—now promoted to the Cabinet—announced the new criteria, or terms of reference, for the pay review body. He had changed those criteria, adding requirements for the body to take into account such factors as the Government's inflation targets, and also to take into account not just the need to recruit, retain and motivate staff, but spending limits.

In the past, the pay review body has always said that its job is to recommend fair pay and conditions for staff, and not to say that, although it would like to recommend a certain sum, it cannot do so, because the Government have said that only so much is available. I fear that, even if the Government implement in full and immediately all that the pay review body has recommended this year, the body will not be allowed to say what the health service requires as it did in the past, because its goalposts have been moved.

Pay for those in the health service should constitute what is needed to recruit and retain the staff who are required to do the job—in the real world, where people must meet real bills. I hope that today's debate will reflect the pressure from the country as a whole, and the public's wish for us not just to say good things about our health service workers, but to pay them properly so that they come, and stay, and come back, to do one of the most vital jobs that the country has to offer.

10.2 am

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I think it would be fair to say that our magnificent victory on 1 May 1997 resulted not just from economic factors and the failure of the last Government, but from the fact that, for at least 10 years, many people had felt that it was high time we had a change in order to save the national health service from the Tory Government who had been diminishing its role for so long. It is incumbent on every Labour Member to bear in mind the fact that we were elected for that specific reason—to save the national health service. We established it way back in the 1940s, and now, after 18 years of Tory rule, we must rebuild it.

It should also be remembered that last year the Labour Government decided to recognise the problems in the NHS, and to find sufficient money to put it back on its feet. It would be wrong to give the impression that we expected £21 billion to be allocated in the last Budget. I know of no hon. Member—and I include Tories and Liberal Democrats—who made any reference to such a figure. In fact, it is on record that the Tories' top figure was about £12 billion.

I believe that the Government's decision enables us to feel a little confident about the pay review recommendations for nurses and other NHS workers. I do not think that my speech, or that of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), will decide their fate; I think that the key ingredient in ensuring better pay for nurses was provided at the moment when the Government decided to allocate that £21 billion.

The Government may feel that the money should be spent in a certain way—that more should be spent in one area, and less in another. Let me emphasise again, as I have for several months, that the decision on pay for nurses and others—including those who clean the wards, for instance—will be a defining factor for the next three years. We cannot afford to hear, day in, day out, arguments from those who are at the sharp end in the NHS.

Unlike the Liberals, who cannot put a real figure on their spending proposals because they spent their extra penny on tax many months ago, the Government must think in terms of an increase of no less than 10 per cent. for nurses and others at the bottom of the pay scale. I hope that it will be more. If it is true that we are 12,000 nurses short, and that the NHS is short of staff at all levels, we must institute a regime that will enable us to change the position.

I agree with those who talk about getting rid of agency nurses. I will go further, and say that I do not approve of the pay review body, which was introduced by the Tory Government to solve some of their problems. I would much prefer the NHS trade unions to be able to engage in proper free collective bargaining like every other trade union. My hon. Friend the Minister should recognise that we have a crisis in the health service, that we must try to overcome it, and that in the next three years—in the run-up to the next election—we ought to be able to say that we not only found the necessary money for the NHS, but found enough for nurses, midwives and the rest.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): I agree with what my hon. Friend is saying, but is it not also true that simply saying that there is more money on the table to attract nurses to the profession is not enough? We must recognise that, owing to the 18 years of neglect, training places have not been filled. They have been artificially repressed when the demand has been there. The present Government's task has been impeded by the actions of the last Government, to the point at which we cannot possibly obtain the number of nurses we need in

the time available. Training places must be opened up as a matter of urgency—although, at the same time, we must do as my hon. Friend suggests, and cajole the Government into paying our nurses more.

Mr. Skinner: There is no doubt about that. Just before the recess, I went to St. Thomas's hospital with a colleague who was ill, and I had the shock of my life. I have not spent a great deal of time in hospitals. It was late on a Thursday night, and about 30 people were queueing. Some had been involved in scuffles and the like. It should be noted that it was a Thursday, not a Friday, a Saturday or a Sunday. A nurse was trying to deal with all the people who were trying to get on to the casualty ward. My colleague, who turned out to have had a minor stroke, was taken in. During the two or three hours that I spent in the hospital, people with blood on their ties were shouting and bawling at the lone nurse who was trying to deal with the problems. I heard it said that there would be a three-hour wait for a doctor. This was at about 10 pm on a Thursday, in one of our largest hospitals, just over the river. I realised that the nurse was having some difficulty in handling the problem, so I went outside and had to cajole some of those people into realising that she was not responsible for the mess that night.

It is important that we do not finish up with one nurse at St. Thomas's hospital between 10 o'clock and 1 o'clock trying to deal with 30 people in the casualty department. I suppose that that situation could be mirrored throughout Britain. That is why training and all the rest have to go along with the other policies.

When he talked about England, Scotland, Wales and all the rest of it, the Liberal Democrat spokesman gave the impression that there might be different pay rates for different regions. I happen to be first and foremost a trade unionist and I do not want national pay negotiations to be broken up. It is conceivable that the existing method of pay bargaining will result in more and more break-up, with the result that pay can be negotiated locally. People will then get more pay in some parts of the country and, where unemployment rates are high, they will get considerably less. I can imagine some of the Liberal Democrat Members from Cornwall and the south-west, where pay is traditionally lower, playing merry hell if they found that pay negotiations had been broken up in that fashion. National pay rates are important across the board.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I understand the hon. Gentleman's argument and I have always said that there should be national pay negotiations and national pay rates—I took on the Tories about that when they were in power—but, as he is aware, from later this year, the health service in Scotland will be accountable to the Scottish Parliament. We are not talking about different regions in England, but the four countries of the United Kingdom—different nations. It will be illogical and completely against the wishes of the people if they cannot negotiate their own pay for their own health service. However, that does not mean that, throughout England, we break up the national pay strategy. I support him on that, but Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are different countries.

Mr. Skinner: Frankly, I do not go along with that fancy idea. People can call it devolution or whatever they like, but I used to be a coal miner before I came here and I cannot conceive of a situation where, if we had a lot of pits in Scotland—we do not because the Tories closed most of them—we should have miners being paid one rate in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, another in Scotland and another in Wales. I am not in favour of that.

As a trade unionist, I believe that it is important that we have national pay negotiations. The moment that we have inroads into that proposal, the lowest common denominator in pay sets the pace. The result will be lower wages for all at the end, not the highest common factor.

When my hon. Friend the Minister winds up, and in his representations at other levels, will he bear it in mind that we have to strive to get rid of the internal market, to ensure that we get more nurses, to improve training, to have a pay increase of at least 10 per cent. for those at the bottom of the pay scale, and to ensure that the national pay scale system remains, irrespective of devolution and all the rest that is on stream?

Mr. Purchase: It is refreshing to hear analysis when there was a lack of it from the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)—in fact, the hon. Gentleman was determined not to engage in any analysis or to blame anyone.

Does my hon. Friend accept that the greater problem in the NHS is the lack of acute beds, which were systematically closed year on year in every health district in the British Isles? Throughout the period of Conservative rule, those acute beds were wasted away. During the current crisis, the problem is not just at the front of the house—my hon. Friend referred to accident and emergency—but at the back of the house, where the beds have not been available, with the result that people have been stuck on trolleys in corridors. Does he not accept that that is a critical part of the problem?

Mr. Skinner: Everyone knows that that is one of the problems that we have to resolve. That is one reason why the £21 billion was important. The decision by the Labour Government in the past few months to find £21 billion can help us to resolve that issue. It is one that can be resolved only if the Government take on the system within the NHS that was left to us by the Tory Government, which meant that all those decisions could be taken, that all the trusts could be set up and that the power that used to exist in the NHS was disseminated through the trusts. We have to deal with that as well.

I welcome the fact that we have that additional money to spend. I hope that it will be spent wisely and that we will ensure that, at the core at what we do in the NHS, those people who provide the services will get a much better pay deal as a result of the efforts of the Government to find sufficient money, as they have during the past few months.

10.16 am

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on his success in the ballot. The debate is important. I also welcome the Minister of State to his first opportunity to show his ability at the Dispatch Box.

It is interesting to note the Labour Members who are present; I put aside the Minister and I do not really know the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins), but I assume that he is his Parliamentary

[Mr. David Amess]

Private Secretary. At least I know where I stand with the other four Members who are present—that will damage their careers. We certainly know where we stand with the hon. Members for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase); I forgot the Whip, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall).

I do not know whether the father of the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) would have been pleased with what he said to the Minister for Local Government and Housing yesterday about rate capping. I did not agree with a word that the hon. Gentleman said, but at least he had the guts to take on his own Minister. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) was first elected at the same time as me, although we share nothing in common politically, except perhaps on animal welfare. He was entirely right before Christmas in wanting a debate on the bombing of Iraq. Those four hon. Members are certainly not part of the rubbish that was sold to the British people on 1 May.

I am delighted that the Liberal party has initiated the debate. I am somewhat confused about the position of the Liberal party these days. This morning is a perfect opportunity to find out where it stands. One of its Members, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), was made a privy councillor in the new year's honours list. I congratulate him on that. Over the weekend, he was interviewed on television. He dismissed completely all the difficulties of the Government over the Christmas period and said that he would continue to support the Labour party as long as it continued with its policies on health and education. What we have heard this morning does not seem to bear out that out—and that privy councillor was sitting here earlier. As ever, the Liberal party wants to have its cake and eat it.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Amess: Like all politicians, we want to be loved, but what on earth does the Liberal party stand for?

Dr. Harris: Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Amess: The Liberal Democrat party. The hon. Member for Oxford, East or whatever it is—

Dr. Harris: Oxford, West and Abingdon.

Mr. Amess: The hon. Member for Oxford, East—

Dr. Harris: Oxford, West and Abingdon.

Mr. Amess:—and his colleagues have changed the name of their political party on four occasions, so, okay, it is now the Liberal Democrat party, but all I say to the hon. Gentleman, who was elected on 1 May 1997, is that we want to know where the Liberal party stands on the issue. Does it support the Labour Government? Does its leader want a position in the Cabinet, or, this morning, are we to take seriously—its Members were massed on two Benches—its attack on Her Majesty's Government?

I know that, when the Minister of State stands up, he is going to have quite a bit of briefing that will blame everything on the 18 years of the Conservative Government and say nothing at all about the Liberal party. I do not think that Conservatives and the rest of the country will accept that.

Like the hon. Members for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and for Bolsover, I should like to pay tribute to the work done by health visitors, nurses and midwives in the United Kingdom. We owe all of them a great debt of gratitude. However, I should like to deal with the difficult matter of pay, which is all about management of the economy and setting priorities, which the Liberals, or the Liberal Democrats—unlike the hon. Member for Bolsover, who at least clearly stated his priorities—never want to face up to.

As hon. Members will know, nurses are the backbone of the national health service and provide 80 per cent. of direct patient care. However, there are between 12,000 and 13,000 empty nursing posts in Britain. Moreover, the turnover rate of registered nurses is high—currently at 21 per cent., whereas it was 12 per cent. in 1992.

There are also widespread problems in recruiting nurses. The Government know all about those problems. A survey of 73 NHS trusts, shows that 78 per cent. of trusts now report recruitment problems. The percentage reporting such problems was just above 50 per cent. in 1997 and was 33 per cent. in 1996. The statistics show that, regardless of what the Minister says today, there is a growing recruitment crisis. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said, the nursing profession also faces a "retirement bulge".

The first brief that I shall use today came from the Royal College of Nursing, which would have supplied the brief to any hon. Member who asked for it. That organisation states that

"The Government's decision in January 1998 to stage the nurses' pay award"—

Dr. Harris: And in January 1997.

Mr. Amess: Yes. However, the brief states that the decision in 1998

"had a devastating effect on nurses' morale."

The hon. Member for Oxford, East and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), supported by the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), wants to attack not only the Conservatives but the Government. The Liberal Democrats want to have their cake and eat it.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Amess: Yes, I shall give way to a fellow Health Select Committee member, who is also a practising doctor and is working so hard.

Dr. Brand: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am especially grateful that he has now started to talk about nurses' pay. He has listed a number of problems in nursing. Does he accept that one of the issues affecting not only recruitment but retention of nurses is the constant regrading process, in which senior nurses have to apply for their jobs and are reappointed at a lower grade? It is the most demoralising process for a professional. Does he agree also that that process is a

consequence of trusts being told to do their own thing—thereby destroying a national pay and career structure in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Amess: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I was a Member of Parliament when nurse regrading was developed. Like the Secretary of State—who takes responsibility for everything that happens in his Department—I should be very happy to defend the previous Government's 18 years in office. However, nurse grading is not the straightforward matter that the hon. Gentleman implies that it is.

The Royal College of Nursing wants specifically to compare nurse grading with teacher grading. The college believes that the position of nurses has become much worse compared to that of teachers. I do not know whether the Minister thinks that it is sensible to have such a relative decline.

The Royal College of Nursing believes that the only way in which nurses can earn extra money is by working unsociable and extra hours. The college believes that it is wrong for such a situation to continue, and that retention of nurses would be much improved if there were a real career development plan. Perhaps the Minister will be able today to tell us about such a plan. The Royal College of Nursing also wants the Government to develop family-friendly employment policies, and believes that serious health and safety priorities in the NHS must be addressed.

Two months ago, the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing), the parliamentary leader of the Scottish National party, sat next to me at a midwife rally, which was an interesting occasion. Such rallies were held regularly throughout the 18 years of the Conservative Government, and Labour Members and spokesmen were always there to address the masses, by whom they were applauded. Two months ago, when I attended, and spoke to, a rally, some Labour Members showed up, although no Minister was available to do so.

Mr. Skinner: I was there.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I was there.

Mr. Amess: I know that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey was there, and that he received a good reception.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): I was there, too.

Mr. Amess: Yes, I know. However, I should like to deal with the point about the Minister not being at the rally. During the rally, the Health Secretary's special adviser came in, looking extremely worried, and passed a bit of paper to the front of the audience. The audience was subsequently told that Baroness Hayman would meet a delegation a little later in the day. My word, it certainly takes great guts and courage to meet a delegation privately.

The Government did not say to the electorate, "Hang on; we'll have to wait two years for reform because the Conservatives have left the health service in a terrible mess. It is very sad that people are dying and operations are not being performed, but you'll have to wait at least two years. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has told us that 1999 is the year of delivery, and we can't do anything immediately." The Government should have had the courage during the general election to face up to that difficult audience.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to midwives. The rally that I attended two months ago was attended also by midwives from Southend and from my former constituency of Basildon. Midwives in Southend would like me to say that the midwifery situation there is good. Southend hospital does not have problems in recruiting midwives. Midwives from Southend were at the rally to support midwives in Basildon.

I was present at the birth of all five of my children, all of whom were delivered at Basildon hospital, and some of the midwives at the hospital have become great friends of mine. Midwives at Basildon face grave problems, which are shared by midwives across the country. In the past five years in the United Kingdom, for example, there has been a decrease of 2,500 in the number of midwives. Increasing numbers of midwives—a 13 per cent. increase in the past 10 years—are working part time. There is also a high wastage rate of midwifery students.

Health visitors are perhaps not as well represented as the other two groups of health service workers. Nevertheless, they, too, do a very valuable job.

I tell the Minister that I do not doubt for one minute that the Labour Government are genuine in their aspirations. On his return to the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister said that he wanted to be judged not on the Government's difficulties during the Christmas recess but on his achievements in health and education. I should be more than happy to make such a judgment. The British people, too, will make such a judgment.

It was a gross deception, on 1 May 1997, to give the British people the impression that the health service would be transformed quickly. The Secretary of State has now accepted that the health service is in crisis. Nevertheless, about six weeks ago, the Minister for Public Health said that there is no rationing in the health service. That statement was laughable. The Government have to be more straightforward in dealing with the difficulties in the health service.

The wonderful men and women working in the health service are of course overworked and underpaid, as health service workers always have been. Ultimately, however, it will be up to the Government to tell us their priorities. Achieving those priorities will depend entirely on the Government's management of the economy. The press has recently reported rumours about giving certainly student nurses a substantial pay increase. I should welcome such an increase. I welcome also the opportunity provided today by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey to share our views on such important matters.

10.29 am

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on securing the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) for his concern for my career. I am not too worried about that. My career suffered long ago because I speak my mind. I propose to do the same in this debate. His difficulty was

[Mr. Harry Cohen]

his failure to speak his mind when the Conservatives were in power. He is still trying to draw a veil over their poor record on the NHS.

I am proud to be a vice-chairman of the Royal College of Midwives. Our midwives do a magnificent job and provide an outstanding service—perhaps the best in the world. They save many lives and I should like, as well as their wonderful service here, their skills to be exported worldwide. They provide terrific value for money, caring for two for the price of one. In more senses than one, that should be regarded as new labour.

Midwives should not be taken for granted as they are. In recent years, they have suffered a serious deterioration in pay and working conditions. The pay of midwives, nurses and health visitors has slipped behind that of comparable professions since the 1980s. As I pointed out to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on Monday, their pay has slipped over the past decade from 85 to 76 per cent. of average earnings.

There are two reasons why midwives' pay has not kept pace with other public sector pay. The first is the local pay arrangements set up by the previous Government. The trusts simply did not pay. They were prepared to pay for more managers and to become more business-oriented, but they ignored their staff and did not pay extra to nurses and midwives. The second factor is the "Changing Childbirth" report, with which I agree. It dealt with important issues that we must come back to. Greater flexibility and choice and more midwifery support are important. "Changing Childbirth" gave midwives more responsibility, but, instead of being paid more for it, many of them were paid less. They were cheated and did not even receive the minimum F grade that they were supposed to get. Some trusts paid the minimum F grade by lowering staff from G grade. That has resulted in shortages so serious that the Audit Commission questioned in its 1997 report whether there were enough midwives nationally to

"provide a safe service and adequate support to w[illegible]"

The number of midwives registered [illegible]e United Kingdom Central Council has fallen by 2,500 over the past five years to the lowest figure this decade. Some 60 per cent. of qualified midwives are not practising and there is a 21 per cent. turnover rate of nurses and midwives according to the *Nursing Times* this month. That shows the extent of the shortages. Only one midwife in 10 is under 30. That shows the failure to recruit to midwifery. Up to 25 per cent. of midwives could retire in the next five to 10 years. That shows how serious the crisis is. Nearly 50 per cent. of midwives work part time—an increase of 13 per cent. over the past 10 years. I agree that more flexibility is needed in the service, but there is clearly a shortage.

I see that the Whip wants me to wind up within three minutes, so I shall keep my remarks brief. The shortages are serious. The increased pressures that they put on midwives have led to problems of stress in the workplace and an increase in staff sickness. Many are not staying in the profession because of that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) that this is a defining moment for the Government. The NHS is vital to our society. It is much loved by the people and it is vital electorally. Getting it right means putting all the pieces of the jigsaw in place. The Government have made a good start by putting in more cash—three times more than the Liberal Democrats asked for in their manifesto.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury) *rose—*

Mr. Cohen: I am sorry, but I do not have the time.

Getting rid of the internal market and the business approach are good steps, but there are three other pieces of the jigsaw to be filled in: more beds, because they were cut too much; more training for nurses, midwives and doctors; and more pay. Proper pay is essential to attract and retain people. I repeat the call that I made earlier this week. We need a substantial pay rise above inflation for nurses and midwives.

10.35 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I shall concentrate on the pay award for nurses and midwives, because that is what people will be expecting to hear about. Failing to invest in decent pay for nurses is a huge false economy. The issue is not whether the pay rise is affordable, but whether not giving a decent and fair pay rise is affordable. People do not understand why that cannot be done.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) talked about the loss of beds. He gave the impression that they were lost because people went around with screwdrivers dismantling them. They were lost because nurses were lost. The hardware is there, but the nurses to staff the beds are lacking. We shall not be able to increase the number of beds available in the NHS unless we bring nurses back. The beds crisis in the NHS that the Secretary of State speaks of is caused by a nursing staff crisis. We have to make the necessary investment.

It will not be acceptable for the Government to pull a stunt when the pay award is announced. Increasing pay for the lowest-paid nurses may be welcome, but it will not be enough. It will be a cheap option, because increasing the pay of the cheapest is not the same as dealing with the middle-ranking nurses, who are leaving in large numbers. Implementing the pay award in full will not be enough without some atonement for the staging of the pay award this year.

When the Conservatives staged the pay award in January 1997, the then shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith)—the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) should be aware that I am the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon—roundly condemned the decision, saying that it was the price of economic failure. A year later, a Labour Government did the same. The gap between expectations and delivery demoralised nurses. Not only should the Government not stage this year's award—I do not think that they would dare—but they should return to each nurse the £250 that they lost because of the staging in 1997 and 1998 and call it a "debt of atonement". We have still not heard an apology from the Government to the nurses and to the patients who have suffered from the lack of nurses. Cash will mean more than just an apology.

The hon. Members for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) repeated like a broken record the arguments about the Government's generosity

in funding the NHS. There has been no such generosity over the past two years, which, added to the previous 18 years, have brought the NHS to its current state. Library figures, which the Government have never challenged, show that the Government's real-terms increase in funding for the NHS in England in 1997–98 and 1998–99 is around 2.4 per cent. per year, compared with the Conservative record over 18 years of 3.1 per cent.—a level of funding that brought the NHS to its knees. Even the generous increases to come in the next three years will produce a real-terms increase in funding over this Parliament of only 3.7 per cent. That extra 0.6 per cent. compared to the Tory record does not make the difference between saving the NHS and failing to do so. My local health service has told me that, next year, in the first year after the comprehensive spending review, it will have discretionary spending of only 1 per cent. in real terms with which to give nurses a decent pay award above inflation. The Government should give serious consideration to providing extra revenue from the forecast Treasury surplus to allow health authorities to fund a fair pay award for nurses and retain some extra funding for growth in services, particularly mental health services.

I conclude by urging the Government not only to be fair, but to recognise the wrongs that have been done both during their period in office and the Conservative party's period in office. They must recognise that we shall not have a decent health service unless we are prepared to pay for it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said, we must start the debate about how we are to raise the percentage of gross domestic product that we spend on the health service so that the service can meet the expectations of patients, users, relatives and carers in this country.

The Government must take urgent measures not only on pay but on the whole approach taken to nurses and midwives to ensure that the NHS is not stopped from developing by a short-sighted false economy and a shortage of the professionals upon whose hard work and dedication patients and those responsible for the running of the NHS all depend.

10.40 am

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on ensuring that we have a chance to debate the staff of the NHS. I believe firmly that the Government were elected on pledges, and the backbone of our pledges was on the NHS. That is crucial, and we must never lose sight of that. In fairness to the Government, everyone should support and welcome the £21 billion that has gone towards saving the NHS. The NHS has been neglected over 18 years. It was not at the forefront of the previous Government's thinking, and their support for the NHS dropped year on year. We have seen a revival of the NHS, and we can all be proud of that £21 billion.

Mr. Rendel: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that some of that money at least will be wasted by the Government's failure to put money into local authorities, which will mean cuts in social services and therefore more health service spending?

Mr. Hoyle: I am sorry that I gave way if that is the best that we will get this morning. It is about the NHS, and supporting the NHS is the £21 billion that is there for the NHS to spend. We must remember the staff, who ought to be at the forefront of our minds. I believe that the Government take on that responsibility well. The Government will ensure that the staff are happy because if the staff are unhappy the NHS will fail to work. We must bring forward those recommendations to ensure that we attract people to the NHS and then retain them. Those are the crucial messages that we must send out—not only have the Government put in £21 billion, but we care about the NHS workers, and that will come across loud and clear when my hon. Friend the Minister replies.

I should like my hon. Friend the Minister of State to congratulate the staff of the Chorley and South Ribble hospital on the way in which they have managed to cope with the flu epidemic in the north-west. Those dedicated and loyal staff ensured that the hospital remained open, and I wish to put on the record the House's congratulations to them on the work they put in over Christmas. Christmas is a time when people expect to be with their families, but the staff did not hesitate or shrink from the job they are paid to do. They came in and volunteered to keep the hospital going. It would be nice if we could reward their dedication somewhere along the line.

The NHS is not only about nurses but about doctors, auxiliaries, porters, and everyone involved who plays a part. It is important to keep the NHS together and continue to reward the staff. We must ensure that the Government never turn away from that pledge. I was proud to be elected in 1997 and I was proud to see the investment in the NHS to ensure that it has a viable future—a future in which the Government can take pride. I hope that we can go into the next election with a clean record on health.

There is always more that we can do. There always will be matters on which people will say that we are failing. That will continue as health evolves. There always will be a need for more funding. I know that we will not shrink from that, and I am proud to have been elected into this Labour Government.

10.44 am

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): First, I welcome the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) to the Dispatch Box. We served on the Select Committee on Social Security together and it is good to have the opportunity to spar with him again. We can see a pattern emerging here. Whenever the Government are in crisis and a Minister resigns, we lose someone from the health team. A Minister goes and a new one comes. In that spirit, I wish the Minister of State continuing and rapid promotion.

We have a lot to thank the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for this morning, as he has raised this very important topic. The hon. Gentleman knows that I am ever reasonable and it is more often than not that I agree with him—particularly with his analysis of the problems that the NHS faces, and his reasonable attacks on the Government for failing to admit that rationing inevitably exists in the NHS. I disagree with some of the solutions that he advocates, and he fails particularly to explain how the NHS can be properly funded. Calling always for more is one of the privileges

[Mr. Alan Duncan]

of permanent opposition. I can see the merits of the wish of the hon. Gentleman for Parliament to vote on pay levels but, again, I must ask him where the money would come from. He never says.

The hon. Gentleman did not say much about midwives, although that is one of the topics of his debate. However, I understand that he was pressed for time. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) pointed out that I have spoken to midwives a number of times, and they are indignant at the way in which their case been handled by the Government. A Minister would not even turn up to either of their two lobbies of Parliament, and they feel strongly that they need a re-evaluation of their grading.

Midwives also feel strongly that childbirth is not just about going to modern, central hospitals—it is about home births. I say that with feeling, as I was a home birth. Believe it or not, I was a 10 lb baby. I do not quite know what went wrong since. *[Interruption.]* I see my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) coming in. I do not know what size of baby he was.

The debate is largely about nurses, and their plight is critical. The Royal College of Nursing estimates that, across Britain, 12,000 to 13,000 full-time posts are unfilled. The turnover of nurses leaving their jobs has dramatically increased since the general election; so, indeed—in a survey of NHS trusts—has their judgment as to whether or not they have a recruitment problem dramatically increased since the general election on 1 May 1997. Whereas about 33 per cent. thought that they had a problem, it is now 78 per cent. I fear that it is creeping up to 100 per cent. who feel that they have a problem.

As the Royal College of Nursing has said, the decision in January 1998 to stage the pay award was absolutely devastating to morale. Nurses feel that that was a betrayal of everything that they were promised by the Labour party in opposition. It is the policy of Her Majesty's official Opposition to say that the Government must honour any pay review recommendation in full, and do it in one go without staging. In that sense, we agree with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and with the first two points that he outlined this morning.

I must pass swiftly over what the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) said. He made a lot of noise and called for a lot more. He is either in tune with the Labour Government or he is, once again, split from it. We shall soon find out on which side of that divide he sits.

The plight of nurses, midwives and health visitors is but a part of a set of wider problems in the NHS that are made much worse by the Government. When the Government are told that a hospital should stay open, they shut it. When they are told that a hospital should shut, they keep it open. Their pressure on the whole system to fiddle the waiting list figures is affecting patient care for the worse. The recruitment and retention problem in the nursing profession has been made critical by those actions. They have patients waiting on trolleys and corpses in container coolers waiting to be buried. What the Government do for nurses, midwives and health visitors will be a crucial test for them. We and the country are waiting to see whether they pass or fail this critical test.

10.49 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I welcome the opportunity to respond to this important debate on a key group of national health service staff who do such a tremendous job, often in less than ideal circumstances. Like other hon. Members, I shall concentrate on nurses, midwives and health visitors, but I, too, acknowledge the contribution of all who work in the health service throughout the year.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on his success in obtaining the debate. However, his comments and those of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) would have had more credibility if those hon. Gentlemen had had the grace to acknowledge what the Government have done and the extent to which we have exceeded the promises made by the Liberal Democrats at the last election.

In their election manifesto, the Liberal Democrats promised to spend an extra £540 million each year on the NHS. In our first two years, we have put in an extra £2 billion. As my hon. Friends the Members for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) and for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) said, over the next three years, we shall put in an extra £21 billion, which is far and away more than the Liberal Democrats ever promised.

I thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) for his kind words. His promises would have more credibility if we all had shorter memories.

The background to today's debate is, in part, the recent pressure on the NHS and on emergency admissions in particular. In a statement to the House on Monday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State acknowledged the impact of the recent surge in the numbers of people needing to visit their doctor, call an ambulance or be admitted to hospital. He paid tribute to all the NHS staff who are coping, despite the fact that their own numbers have been depleted through illness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley invited me to congratulate staff in his local hospital. I send my congratulations to all the staff who have worked so hard over recent weeks.

My right hon. Friend set out the measures that have been taken to cope with winter pressures. Some £159 million has been allocated for schemes to provide extra beds, more round-the-clock operations, early discharge schemes supported by community nurses, and partnership projects with social services. Last week, we published details of almost 2,200 schemes being carried out by health authorities. Today, we have published further details of 185 partnership schemes being carried out jointly by the health service and local social service departments in a combined effort to deal with winter pressures.

Over the past week, parts of the NHS with particular problems that could be eased by extra cash have been given access to the £50 million contingency fund. Those measures are making a real difference to the ability of the NHS to cope with the present situation.

All over the country, people are working flat out to deal with winter pressures. The publication of the joint partnership proposals today shows that they are not doing so on their own. People working in social service departments in local councils are doing their bit to bolster

those efforts. Huge demands on the NHS are being met by an unprecedented level of partnership between hospitals and councils.

In spite of those measures, the NHS is still under real pressure, and part of the problem is the shortage of nurses. Unlike our predecessors, this Government acknowledge that there is a shortage. We have put in place a range of measures to put things right in the medium to long term. There is no one-stop quick fix.

As the debate has highlighted, an imminent issue is the recommendations of the pay review body, which are due shortly. Despite the invitation of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, I am not sure that it would be a career-enhancing move if I announced the results of that process today. The House will understand that I cannot anticipate our response today. We shall respond at the appropriate time.

Dr. Harris: Would it not be a career-enhancing move, and would it not enhance the Government's reputation, if the Minister took this opportunity to apologise to the nurses and midwives in the health service for the staging of last year's pay award? He could do that without any commitment to the financial compensation that I mentioned earlier. Now is his opportunity.

Mr. Denham: In response to the hon. Gentleman, I shall set out the approach that we have taken in our evidence to the pay review body. As my right hon. Friend said on Monday, we hope that the independent review body will propose a settlement which is fair to nurses and midwives and affordable for the national health service, and which the Government will be able to implement in full. As we said in our evidence, there is a case for an enhanced increase in starting pay for newly qualified nurses.

The Government are pledged to modernise the NHS, to make it modern and dependable for the 21st century. The programme of modernisation will be delivered only with the support of staff, which is why we must ensure that we can recruit and retain staff, get the numbers of staff right and ensure that they are paid fairly.

Pay matters, of course, but it is not the only issue and it must be seen in its proper context. Most surveys of nurses show that there are many important factors in attracting them to work in the NHS, to stay in their jobs or to return. It does not diminish the importance that nurses attach to pay to recognise that those surveys raise issues that are often of equal or greater importance than pay. Other important issues for nurses include better resources to do the job, help with child care, more opportunities to develop skills, a better career structure and measures to tackle violence against staff.

The Government are taking action across the range of issues of concern to nurses and to the NHS. We are providing the funding to employ more nurses, we are taking action to increase nurse training and to improve the conditions of work for nurses, we are encouraging qualified nurses back into the nursing profession, we are taking action to improve the career prospects for nurses and we want to take further action on pay reform.

The roots of the current shortage of nurses lie in the previous Government's cut in the number of training places. Our own surveys carried out shortly after we came into office confirm that trusts were having difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified nurses. We have put in place a raft of measures to put matters right, so that we can look forward to year-on-year increases in the number of qualified nurses, as a result of our commitment to nurse training.

An extra £60 million is being invested in nurse training next year and nursing students are being given favourable NHS funding support in comparison with other students. As part of the comprehensive spending review, we are investing an additional £18 billion in the NHS in England over the next three years, which will enable up to 15,000 more nurses to be taken on over the next three years, and an extra 6,000 additional nurse training places are planned to address the shortfall that we inherited.

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman must forgive me—I have three minutes left.

I can refute the claim by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) that the Government cut back by 3 per cent. a planned increase in the number of places for 1997–98. The reality is that, in January 1997, the then right hon. Member for Loughborough promised that there would be additional 1,300 places for new nurse training. Far from cutting back on that, we achieved an additional 1,418 nurses in training in that year.

The numbers applying for nurse training are increasing—16,800 students applied for Project 2000 nursing and midwifery courses in 1996–97 and almost 2,000 more applied in 1997–98.

We are not just increasing the number of training places. Some £50 million was allocated last September to expand the number of part-time nursing courses, provide bursaries to enable 2,700 enrolled nurses to upgrade their qualifications and provide opportunities and financial support for other NHS staff, such as health care assistants, to become qualified nurses. More than 1,000 staff will benefit from that scheme over the next three years.

The aim of providing up to 15,000 more nurses, midwives and health visitors is a challenging one. Training is one part of the answer, but we must also promote nursing as a career, attracting back nurses who have left the profession for whatever reason. More than 100,000 nurses are on the register but are not practising. Some of those nurses could return to nursing tomorrow, whereas others would need support in refreshing their professional skills. That is why, at the Royal College of Nursing congress last April, we announced a further £4 million for local investment in "return to practice" initiatives, building on an allocation of £10.5 million in 1997 to support return to practice and continuing professional development.

As well as getting more people into nursing, the Government want to hold on to the nurses that we have. We expect employers to use family-friendly employment policies to respond to the demand for more flexible patterns of working, in order to secure and keep the staff that they need.

Those matters are important, but pay rates matter too. I said that we hope that the independent review body will propose a settlement that is fair to nurses and midwives and affordable for the NHS, and that the Government will be able to implement in full. We also recognise that we

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need a modern, fair and effective pay system that supports us in paying nurses, midwives, health visitors and other NHS staff fairly, in a way that enables them to give their best for patients in a new, modern and dependable national health service.

When we came to office, the Government said that we wanted to return to national pay for the NHS if it could be matched with meaningful local flexibility. I know that many nurses and others working in the NHS share my wish for better career progression and more modern conditions of service that are relevant to the way in which people now work—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now move on to the debate on reform of the Select Committee system.

Select Committee Reform

11 am

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I am pleased to introduce this debate, especially when there is a growing view both inside this place and outside that by stealth the status and role of Parliament are being eroded. That is not any reflection upon any particular Administration, but it has been happening increasingly over recent decades.

Those of us who are jealous of our parliamentary role of scrutinising the Executive and voting supply want to see an opportunity to restore these parliamentary rights and duties. That is in line with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) when she was the Leader of the House and discussing the reform of Select Committees. She said

"that (the Jopling Reforms) really only tinkered with the problem . . . There was little in Jopling to make parliament produce better legislation; there was nothing at all to make MPs more effective in holding the Executive to account. Those tasks will be Labour's true project for parliament."

One of the exciting challenges for this Administration is to leave an enduring legacy of having given Parliament new opportunities to scrutinise the Executive.

As we look back relatively recently, one of the great legacies—one of the few legacies that I would refer to from the period when Margaret Thatcher was in office—was the St. John-Stevas reforms, which created the present Select Committee system, and thank goodness for it. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will leave an enduring legacy, having further developed the Select Committee system during this Parliament.

Of course, the Select Committees are ancient. They have been used many times and it is wrong to suggest that they are a new idea. They have come into their own more recently as, inexorably, government has demonstrated a rapacious appetite in putting through legislation, minimising debate and exercising its role as the Executive. That is in the nature of things, human nature being what it is. However, our duty is to monitor, control, scrutinise, cajole and often criticise the conduct of whatever party is in government.

I want to canvass what are basically cultural changes that reflect the attitudes of Members and of others who are interested and active in politics and journalism. We must change our attitudes to the role of Members of Parliament. All too often people come to this place—I am talking also of our friends and loved ones—and say, for example, "I hope it won't be long before you are a Minister," or "It won't be long before you are a Minister." There is the presumption that in politics in the United Kingdom promotion means becoming a Minister.

I hope that we can create a culture whereby there is an alternative. For example, a Member might aspire to become the chairperson of a Select Committee; in other words, to head up a Select Committee. I think that that will come about, but I would like to move on the process.

Part of moving it on is the question of resources. One of my good friends said, "For goodness sake, Mackinlay, don't suggest that we should have more money." I will not make that suggestion because I think that the disparity between Ministers' pay and that of Members is constitutionally wrong. Basically, there should be no disparity. I am not advancing the idea that Chairmen of

Select Committees should have more pay, but I think that they need more resources and the facilities that go with office. I am talking not of trappings but facilities that will enable them to be better leaders of Select Committees.

I shall give one example. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, in the nature of his work—and that of his predecessors—has to visit many embassies and attend many functions. It is a waste of my hon. Friend's time and that of others, and wrong, that they must compete in the taxi queue when they need to be at the embassies of China or South Africa, for example. There should be the resource of a pool car, not as a matter of status but as common sense.

It is clear that Select Committee Chairmen need better office accommodation and personal back-up staff. Our friends in the Clerk's Department are clearly under-resourced. Many of us recognise, particularly as we put more and more demands upon them, that we are not voting additional resources to their Department to enable them to meet the new tasks and challenges that we present to them as we become more diligent and more enthusiastic proponents of the Select Committee system. I hope that during the life of this Parliament these matters will be considered, followed by action and additional resources.

There is a case also for Members who serve on Select Committees to be given some additional resources. We are faced with the marshalling of papers and preparation for Select Committee hearings. I find that this preparation presents an enormous task. I feel sometimes that I have not gone into the Committee Room as sufficiently briefed and prepared as I would like to be because of a lack of sufficient back-up facilities. I hope that that might be considered.

I should also like to float an idea on which I have not concluded my view. The best Select Committee report, of course, is one that has been reached by consensus. However, we must recognise that sometimes there might be occasions for minority reports, not necessarily on a partisan basis. In exceptional circumstances where demonstrably there is a strongly held, reasonable but minority view, it may well be that there should be resources available to facilitate the minority. I stress that I am talking about a minority of view, not a party minority. Indeed, the view could be held by a member of the majority party.

I invite my right hon. and hon. Friends to consider another matter that they might discuss through the usual channels with leaders of other parties: the selection of members of Select Committees and their Chairmen. I accept that I am a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs by patronage. I could be removed from it by the same source. I think that within the parliamentary Labour party, and its equivalent in the other parties, a selection of Members to serve on Select Committees should be made by Back-Benchers, not by party managers. Alternatively, and as I would prefer, there could be a new Committee of Selection exclusively drawn up of those who are not in the Executive and not on the Opposition Front Bench, who would then select Members to serve on Select Committees and recommend who should be their Chairmen.

I have always been somewhat cussed and difficult. As you will remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was instrumental, along with some Conservative Members and my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)—my hon. Friend would have liked to be in the Chamber but she is detained on other parliamentary business—in putting the late Sir Robert Adley in the Chair of the Transport Select Committee in the last Parliament. Sir Robert was very well qualified. However, we were told whom we should have as Chairman. One baulks at that. I accept that the alternative candidates were extremely good as well. However, I am rather proud that I was instrumental in ensuring that Sir Robert became the Chairman.

After Sir Robert's untimely and tragic death, we had Paul Channon, who we said was parachuted in to be Chairman. Paul Channon was a perfectly charming person and he emerged as an extremely good Chairman of the Committee in the previous Parliament. I am not talking about personalities, but it seems to be wrong that these appointments should be handed down from on high.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps this is a subject that is best kept to our respective biographies.

Mr. Mackinlay: I realise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this is a delicate subject. I shall move on—I get your drift.

We must also protect those on the Front Benches from falling into the temptation of the parliamentary sin of removing Members from Select Committees after a general election because they have not been deemed entirely helpful to the Executive. I hope that that practice will be reconsidered.

All hon. Members who have been members of Select Committees have felt, from time to time, that some witnesses have not been wholly frank. In exceptional cases, some have misled a Committee by not telling the truth. Part of the problem is that some witnesses do not understand the gravity of their attendance before the high court of Parliament. We should consider the automatic administration of the oath, which would emphasise that people have to tell the whole truth and that they are embarking on perjury if they do not. Alternatively, we could remind witnesses of the Sessional Orders that we pass at the beginning of each Parliament, which state:

> "if it shall appear that any person hath been tampering with any Witness, in respect of his evidence to be given to this House, or any Committee thereof, or directly or indirectly hath endeavoured to deter or hinder any person from appearing or giving evidence the same is declared to be a high crime and misdemeanour; and this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender."

The language may be arcane and many centuries old, but the message still needs to be brought home: people should not impede witnesses' attendance at House of Commons Select Committees, and those who do attend must be candid with those Committees. We must find a way to underline that message.

One element of the Scotland Act 1998 is interesting. Although we have not included in that legislation the same parliamentary privileges and powers of contempt that exist in this House, the Act provides that recalcitrant witnesses before Committees of the Scottish Parliament can be prosecuted in the High Court. I prefer the ability of the House of Commons to deal with such matters, but it is interesting that a greater sanction to deal with people who are not candid will be available to the Scottish Parliament than in practice is available here at Westminster. Such a provision would also help people

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who genuinely want to be candid with Parliament but who are nervous about the response of their employers, or other factors.

The House has a duty to foster and encourage bipartisanship in Select Committees. I think that most hon. Members approach their Committee duties in that spirit, but although we cannot legislate for it, sometimes we need to be reminded of it. There are some good examples of that bipartisan spirit in action. For instance, in the previous Parliament, the investigation into the Pergau dam affair produced a very critical report of the then Conservative Government. That report would not have emerged had not Conservative Members acted in a bipartisan manner and approached the investigation without fear, favour or partiality. All Governments must understand that it is the duty of Members of Parliament to approach Select Committee work in that spirit.

The value of that spirit came home to me in this Parliament. I have a good friend who is a member of the Government, although I stress that he is not a member of the foreign affairs team and I shall not embarrass him by naming his constituency. However, he said something interesting to me in connection with the investigation of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs into the so-called Sandline affair. His exact words were, "Mackinlay, I can't understand why you are asking all these questions or why you are pursuing this matter. You are a member of the premier parliamentary Committee: why don't you just enjoy it?" [*Laughter.*] He was not being malicious in any way, he was simply incredulous.

That remark will certainly appear in my memoirs. It shows how high is the mountain that we must climb to change the attitudes of members of the Executive and to persuade them that we have a duty to perform, and demonstrates that our membership of Committees is not exclusively a matter of going on trips abroad—the clear implication of my friend's remark. Government must accept scrutiny.

Other hon. Members who wish to speak on this subject will no doubt deal with ways in which Select Committees' role could be developed in terms of the legislative process, how Committees can better tackle Parliament's ancient duty of providing supply to the Crown, and how they might exert some influence on the details of Government. That was always our particular function, but as the functions of Government and the size of departmental budgets have grown so massive, to a great extent it has been lost.

An exception is the Public Accounts Committee. Its present Chairman is the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) and his predecessor was my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). That Committee, which conducts its scrutiny retrospectively, has performed an enduringly helpful role in Parliament, and it has contained some other highly distinguished members. It has long been accepted by the Executive, but we must borrow from its experiences and style of resources.

During the Foreign Affairs Committee investigation into the Sandline affair, it became clear to me that we needed someone comparable to the Comptroller and Auditor General—an officer empowered by Parliament to examine the details on behalf of the Committee and to oblige people to furnish documents and give evidence. The considered report of such an officer would have made our hearings more relevant and focused and would have advanced the process of our examination.

I therefore believe that Select Committees dealing with difficult matters that consume much time should be able to appoint someone with the authority of Parliament to do the initial spade work on their behalf. That option should be available to all Select Committees. For example, although I have not served on it, I am sure that a Committee investigating the history of the BSE problem would justify the use of such an officer.

I welcome the use by some Committees of confirmatory hearings, which are basically informal and are not covered by Standing Orders. For example, the Select Committee on the Treasury spoke to the people involved with monetary policy, and the Select Committee on Education and Employment has also held comparable hearings. I should like the Foreign Affairs Committee to have the power at least to give confirmatory hearings to ambassadors. Of course, the Committee could not deal with the huge volume of appointments and would not want to, but the right to examine new ambassadors would be a welcome additional power.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The Foreign Affairs Committee already has that right. There is nothing to prevent it from calling an ambassador to appear before it so that it can ask questions to determine his competence or otherwise.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I should like such a process to be relatively automatic, especially when the ambassador in question is the son-in-law of a Prime Minister. I was not a Member of the House at the time, but that was a glaring instance of an appointment that should have been scrutinised. I raise that example as a matter of history, as I am sure that it could not happen today. Even so, I believe that we should pursue the matter of confirmatory hearings.

Another subject with which the House must deal is the question of treaties, most of which are signed by royal prerogative and are not ratified by Parliament. I want that to change, and believe that it would be suitable for a Select Committee to examine treaties and make recommendations to Parliament.

The final point that I want to bounce off hon. Members is small but needs to be considered. When there has been an important public sitting of a Select Committee, I am not allowed to show anyone the verbatim report that is produced several days later. That is really frustrating, and inevitably the rule has been broken. I have no strong views about whether such a report should be produced by Gurney's or by *Hansard*—

Mr. Sheldon: Or on the internet.

Mr. Mackinlay: Or on the internet: as I say, I have no strong views on that, but, in a modern Parliament, we need to have the verbatim report the day after the sitting of a Committee. It should be a facility equivalent to that of the daily *Hansard* report, which in any event is a draft and therefore open to correction. We need that facility fairly immediately.

I hope that my remarks will be taken on board by my hon. Friend the Minister and by members of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons. I hope that there will be other contributions to this debate both this morning and throughout the Session.

11.20 am

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on his insightful, incisive and dignified speech on a matter that is of considerable importance to the entire House.

On these occasions, it is also a convention to congratulate the hon. Member who has obtained the debate on doing so and, today, that is more than a mere convention because the timeliness of this debate is remarkable. The effectiveness of the way in which the House has carried out its duty of scrutiny has been reduced and not always for reasons that are in the Government's control. Sometimes, it has been reduced for extrinsic reasons, because powers have gone from the House to the European Union or other bodies and we understand that. However, it has also happened for intrinsic reasons.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the sheer volume of legislation, which makes it impossible for us to hear every detail of every Bill on the Floor of the House and forces legislation into Committee where, almost by definition, it is dealt with less effectively than it might be in the House.

There are other paradoxical ways in which scrutiny has been undermined. For example, the televising of the House has had a peculiar effect. In one respect, it has opened up the House for everyone to see. In another, it has introduced a soundbite culture, which has undermined the tradition of reasoned debate on which the House has prided itself for centuries and has thus undermined our ability to scrutinise.

There are other areas. I would not expect the Minister to agree, but pre-emptive referendums take away some of the bite of the argument once they have been carried out. There are also matters that might be the subject of political differences, so I will not stress them when dealing with this quintessentially House subject. However, the size of the Government's majority and the much-argued about reluctance of some Ministers to come before the House have also undermined that scrutiny.

There are many reasons why this debate is timely but it is not so in only one respect, which is that it is on a Wednesday morning when a number of Chairmen of Select Committees, who are probably the people who would be most interested in the debate, are chairing meetings. I know of at least three Chairmen who would otherwise have been here to debate the issue.

The hon. Member for Thurrock referred kindly and accurately to the St. John-Stevas reforms of the early 1980s. On reflection, even the originators of those reforms and Lord Fawsley himself would accept that they achieved only half what they set out to do and, in some respects, the situation is even worse than that.

The nature of our scrutiny can be divided into two groups: policy and expenditure. The scrutiny of policy is handicapped for a number of reasons and, there, the reformers achieved about half of what they set out to do, for reasons that I shall outline. Given that the provision of supply was the origin of all the powers of the House and its primary function in the first instance, it is shameful how we deal with our estimates procedures and exercise our powers over expenditure across Government as a whole, and within Ministries, as a major outcome of policy priorities.

The hon. Gentleman outlined the primary causes of those weaknesses, but I will resummarise them slightly differently, if he will forgive me. First, as he said, is the question of access to information. Of course, Select Committees have the right to summon people and papers and we all do so, but for most Committees—the Public Accounts Committee is a sterling exception—the acquisition of information is to some extent a matter of luck. It is a matter of leak, newspaper report, an indiscreet comment or something that a Minister lets slip; it is not a scientific process and it is not designed to sweep up all the information necessary to the House. The hon. Gentleman made a good point on that subject and I will return to it.

Secondly, on the resources to make use of that information, which is the one area on which I differ with the hon. Gentleman, given that this is the mother of Parliaments it is extraordinary that the resourcing of our Select Committees and the research support that they receive is just about the worst in the world, compared with comparable Houses elsewhere.

Parliamentary time is the third item, and I think that all Select Committee Chairmen are unanimous in saying that we do not give enough parliamentary time to Select Committees. Time on the Floor of the House is fundamental to the exercising of Select Committee powers. They do not have executive powers of their own. Their powers are those of information, exposure and argument and the best place to air those is still, I am glad to say, on the Floor of the House.

The final question is that of parliamentary rights. Select Committees have few rights and I shall propose a small right which will magnify their effectiveness.

On access to information, I agree with the hon. Gentleman's call for a parliamentary investigations officer of some sort—as he said, the equivalent of the Comptroller and Auditor General, who does a wonderful job for my Public Accounts Committee and for Parliament; or something between him and the ombudsman. It should be someone who has the right of access to all information and it is a worthwhile proposal, which I commend to the Government.

The Government have done some good as regards access to information for Select Committees. For example, for the PAC, they removed the idea of "Not for National Audit Office Eyes"—the Whitehall classification. That was a sensible and effective way to improve our scrutiny, and our suggestion would be a natural development from that.

I would go one step further. We have accounting officers in every Government Department who can be held accountable for the money that the Department spends. They appear before the Public Accounts Committee and the other Select Committees and they are held accountable for all the money spent, its proper use and so forth. There ought also to be an information officer in each Department, with the responsibility of drawing to the attention of a Select Committee information that he or she thinks appropriate. If, at some stage, information was not available—be it on Sandline or some other matter—

[Mr. David Davis]

the Committee could ask that officer why it was not told and whether it was a matter of policy not to do so. That would put the onus of responsibility on the civil service.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the change of culture, but the culture of Whitehall is not that of disclosure. As the hon. Gentleman will remember well, when I was Minister with responsibility for Europe I spent a vast quantity of my time trying to ensure that all the other Departments provided the Select Committee on European Legislation with the right documents on time. It is extraordinary that a Minister should have to drive such a process; we could transform in one move the way in which Whitehall approaches that matter.

On resources, I disagree with the hon. Gentleman because there is indeed an argument for radically increasing the resources available to Select Committees. In the scrutiny process, they are up against enormous resources commanded by others. To take an example with which I was familiar, the European Legislation Committee had a few people to support it, but when I was a Minister, my Department, which dealt with the European Union, was probably twice its size. The disparity is clear and should be put right as that would add to the effectiveness and quality of scrutiny and to the quality of recommendations. That is a good thing for a self-confident Government because it will improve the quality of legislation.

In addition to increased resources for individual Committees, there should be a central resource—an extension of the policy and research divisions of our Library, which should be largely staffed by ex-civil servants, seconded civil servants and people who understand Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office issues and so forth and can move around the subjects. A Select Committee that faced a large, sudden demand on its time—be it the Foreign Affairs or the Social Services Committee—could then call down a resource. In particular, the central resource should have a strong financial function, because the involvement of Select Committees in the estimates procedure and the approval of supply is the weakest component of their, and the House's, activity.

The third problem is parliamentary time. A Select Committee that cannot command time on the Floor cannot command the attention of the public, unless it is dealing with something like Sandline and Sierra Leone. Hard cases make bad law; Sandline is not the example that we should be considering. It is the normal operation of Select Committees that should command newspaper interest, not only the exotic and the occasionally scandalous. Such a change would have a major effect. There has already been movement towards it by the allocation of some morning debates by the Liaison Committee, whose Chairman is here, for the debating of Select Committees reports.

A small change would dramatically enhance the effectiveness of Select Committee reports. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays of each parliamentary week, there is a ten-minute rule slot, which, when contested, takes about 35 minutes out of the parliamentary day. It is effective for highlighting the interests of Back Benchers. Why cannot we have about the same time, half an hour, on Monday for a Select Committee to present its report? We could perhaps have 10 minutes for the Chairman, five minutes for two other Members—perhaps also with provision for a minority report—and 10 minutes for the Minister to reply. That would be in prime time at the beginning of the week when attention could be drawn to issues of concern to Select Committees and to the Government's response to them. It is a tiny fraction of parliamentary time, but it would change the culture of Select Committees to producing thoughtful, interesting, debatable, perhaps controversial, reports so that attention did not focus only on scandals and breakdowns of Government.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): My right hon. Friend knows that I sit on the Modernisation Select Committee, to which he referred. He also knows that it is considering an alternative or Main Committee, additional to our main Chamber; it would certainly never take over from the Chamber. Does he believe that that forum might allow many more excellent Select Committee reports to be considered? Does he support the proposal?

Mr. Davis: I thank my hon. Friend. No, I do not, for this straightforward reason. I know of the Australian experience; the four-page note from the clerk of the Australian Parliament points out that the Main Committee may have drawn attention away from the Floor of the House. Everything we do to promote the House's effective scrutiny of the Executive should focus on reinforcing the role of the Floor. That is how to make scrutiny most powerful—not using a Main Committee, which will only be looked at from time to time by lazy journalists.

Mr. Winterton: Where are they all?

Mr. Davis: Indeed, where are they?

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): I am glad that my right hon. Friend gave that answer. Does he agree that of all the proposals before us, that of relegating business from this Chamber to a Main Committee is the most dangerous and insidious?

Mr. Davis: I agree, but my right hon. and hon. Friends tempt me off my main line of argument.

My last substantive point concerns the parliamentary rights of Select Committees. There is a serious problem with how Select Committees deal with the estimates procedure in particular. Our Standing Orders require that amendments to the estimates can only reduce them; they cannot vary them in any other way. That is understandable for the management of Government business and of the economy. Treasury Ministers must have the last word on the Government's aggregate spending, or government becomes meaningless in this day and age. However, we do not have to break that barrier to change the Standing Orders materially for the better.

After Select Committees have taken evidence on a Department's estimate, it is perfectly possible to allow them to recommend in an amendment for debate on the Floor that there should be virement, or movement between one departmental sub-heading and another. To pick an example completely outside my area of policy skill, in international development we might argue that we want to spend less on crisis management and more on crisis prevention, or less on Africa and more on Asia. Such large arguments about priority are the language of politics and it should be possible to conduct them on the Floor.

That would be possible and effective only if the Government had to answer the outcome of a Select Committee's evidence-taking on the Floor.

Of course, a Government with a majority will always be able to vote down such amendments, but Ministers would have to defend the explicit financial priorities of their Departments on the Floor, which is the focus of our scrutiny. This tiny change in Standing Orders would fundamentally change not only the relationship between Parliament and Government but that between Ministers and civil servants in Whitehall. From my own experience, I know that few non-Cabinet Ministers—that means those who have the time to think about things—get anywhere near the numbers involved in running their Departments or decisions on spending priorities.

The change would mean that when a Minister of State appears before a Select Committee to explain why his Department is spending so much money on, say, welfare to work and less on something else, it would suddenly be in the interest of the permanent secretary to ensure that the Minister is incredibly well briefed. The permanent secretary would not want what is really the power of the civil service debated across the Floor. It would be a change not only in the House's ability to scrutinise what the Government do but in the ability of Government to deliver on their policy promises, manifesto commitments and beliefs, which is why they are there in the first place.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: My right hon. Friend has not remarked, as I felt that he would, on whether Select Committees should be given the duty each year of considering the estimates of their Department. It would be not a voluntary but a specific duty to consider them before they are considered and passed by the House.

Mr. Davis: I would turn that round and make it a requirement that each estimate be approved by a Select Committee. The Committee could then decide for itself how much time to spend on the matter. I must press on.

I have one last comment for the Minister. It is difficult for Executives to give power away to Parliament so that it can scrutinise them and make their lives more difficult. But if I may say so, in the same spirit as the hon. Member for Thurrock, some of the greatest things that have happened in this Parliament happened when a Government made such a decision—for example, the small jewel of the Select Committee system today. If I may say so—I say this entirely selfishly—there is the large jewel of the Public Accounts Committee, whose Chairman is a member of the Opposition. That was the result of a decision by Gladstone which, at the time, must have been a difficult decision to make. However, it was a decision of great wisdom, which has lasted one and a half centuries. I see my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) nodding. Such a decision would be difficult for the Executive to make, but it would go down in history as a mark of the confidence of such an Executive and its respect for Parliament.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Right hon. and hon. Members may anticipate that, in line with practice, Front-Bench speeches should begin at about 10 minutes past 12, and I hope that, in order that everyone who wishes to speak in the debate may be included, hon. Members will keep an eye on that fact.

11.40 am

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) is right. The decision to which he referred did so much to make 19th century and 20th century political life what we have come to expect. It was taken by a person who had great authority and power, and who realised the limitations of that. Had we seen rather more of that in this century, we might have been better placed. It was a wonderful decision.

I want briefly to refer to the point made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden about expenditure. That is important. In the annual debates on the Public Accounts Committee—the right hon. Gentleman will introduce this year's debate tomorrow—I used to reproach all the Select Committees. It was my annual regret that they did not consider the amount that was being spent by Government in their areas. I would say, "For heaven's sake, just say, 'I am happy with the way that the Government are spending money in our area. Carry on.'" When the matter is put in that way, it shows how inadequate the examination really is.

We are moving towards resource accounting and that gives us the opportunity to consider all this afresh. It will show just how much has been spent in a particular area on which a Select Committee may have commented or reported, and how much has been spent in another area. The Select Committees may almost be forced to say whether that expenditure is right or wrong. I look forward to seeing that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) introduced today's debate splendidly. He rightly mentioned the need for a parallel career structure. Not so long ago, an important Select Committee Chairman gave up his post for a lowly position on the Front Bench. That is the kind of priority that the House has come to accept, but it need not always do so.

I understand the advantages of office as a way in which to find out how the whole thing works. But when one thinks of the power, opportunities, interest and tasks ahead, one realises that Select Committee Chairmen have a wonderful opportunity. Given the way in which Parliament has evolved during the past 10 or 20 years, there is no doubt that their role has grown in importance. This Parliament has probably seen the most important ever growth in the role of the Select Committee Chairman. I look forward to seeing that trend continue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock rightly spent time on the suggestion of selection by Back Benchers; but the Select Committees themselves can take action. When the Liaison Committee was set up, there was an attempt to shoe-horn in a favourite of the then Prime Minister. As a senior member of the Liaison Committee, I immediately proposed Terence Higgins. Despite one or two people having some doubts in view of the patronage of a Prime Minister, he was voted in.

We have seen other things too. Robert Adley was a great loss; it was he who said that railway privatisation was a poll tax on wheels. It is a great pity that he has not been here during the past four or five years. Of course, we have here the hon. Member for Macclesfield, for whom we all have enormous admiration and affection. He was the object of a peculiar rule, instituted as the Macclesfield rule, which said that if one has been a

[Mr. Robert Sheldon]

Select Committee Chairman for two Parliaments, one cannot stand again. It was such nonsense to create that absurd rule just to dispose of the hon. Gentleman, but, of course, he has rebounded, to the pleasure and joy of us all.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock was right—bipartisanship is crucial. Select Committees consist of people who come in opposed to each other; they have to learn to take into account the facts. In order for the facts to overcome their prejudice, they must have respect not only for those facts, but for each other. That is of enormous importance. A good Chairman will ensure that such a relationship exists between Committee members.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) has done splendidly in the Select Committee on the Treasury. He took his Select Committee away for a weekend to discuss the future. Such bonding situations, where one has respect for the facts, are important. I know, because I was Chairman of the Sub-Committee of the Expenditure Committee nearly 20 years ago, and one of our tasks was to discover how to deal with monetarism in a way that was critical of it and respected the facts. We had confidence in each other and knew that the facts would determine our results, even if the Government of the day were not happy about that. That is of enormous importance and I want to see it continue.

With regard to staffing, my feeling is that one should have the special adviser that one wants. When I was a Select Committee Chairman, I said that anyone who wanted a special adviser should say whom he or she wanted and, as long as another name could be obtained if necessary, he or she could have any adviser whom he or she wanted. No one has ever refused to be a special adviser, so one can have the talent that one wants.

However, I agree that we need something more. We need someone in-house. We do not need long appointments, but appointments of three to five years, so that an area of expertise is developed. I do not fancy someone coming in from outside and being in a controlling position, but a three-to-five-year appointment in certain areas would allow such people to look out for things of which the Committee may not even have thought. That may be one way in which to proceed.

The Treasury and Civil Service Committee did splendidly with regard to confirmatory hearings. The example given by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock was not quite as good as I would have wished, because party politics would come into it; it would be hard to avoid that. But it should be a principle that one cannot appoint someone to public office without having the responsibility—not to consider their private life, because that does not concern us—to ensure that that person is competent, equipped and has the background that fits him for that office.

Finally, I come to the point that I make repeatedly. The hallmark of my present position as Chairman of the Liaison Committee is to get the evidence out quickly. That is enormously important. Uncorrected evidence should be produced the following morning. It is available to members, but not to the House. We have uncorrected evidence in *Hansard*; it simply goes through. But those who concern themselves with these matters—perhaps over-clever people, in the words of a former Chairman of a Select Committee—think that there are questions of privilege. They feel that somebody might bring an action against the Liaison Committee Chairman. I have told them that I am prepared to accept such a challenge, were anyone foolish enough to make it. We are still working on that.

My task now is to get such evidence on the internet. Some of us have the internet and it is almost like having one's own library in one's room. One can see not only the reports but, even more importantly, the evidence. When the evidence comes three or four weeks later, no one bothers with it. If one had the evidence from the Governor of the Bank of England, the Foreign Secretary or whoever the following day, it would become part of the activity of the House. It would become part of questions for the Prime Minister and for others. The evidence as it is announced could be part of the kind of half-hour discussion that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden proposed. That is the sort of thing I want to see and I look forward to seeing it in due course.

11.50 am

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I shall approach the matter from the other end of the experience scale from the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I first entered the House in 1997. Since then, Select Committees have taken up a great deal of my time. I have been a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs and, more recently, I have been the Chairman of the Select Committee on Information, one of the domestic Committees. As a new Member, in common with many of my colleagues, I have found that the Select Committees are one of the great joys of the House. They are far better than most of us anticipated. They have an extraordinarily significant role in terms of holding the Executive to account. They are particularly relevant in a Parliament such as this where the Government have a large majority. That is a simple fact of life that I am not willing to dispute, and in that context, the role of the Select Committees takes on even greater stature than in a more marginal Parliament.

My experience on a departmental Committee has shown that there is an intellectual and factual rigor. There are debates around the facts rather than around partisan positions. That occurs far more often in Select Committees than in the Chamber. The experience of grilling a Minister for two hours far exceeds anything that happens in the Chamber during Question Time, which is really a matter of political points scoring.

One of the great ironies is that the bipartisan approach—perhaps in my position I should say tripartisan approach—that one takes in a Select Committee is made easier by the fact that it is not in the public eye or before the cameras. The public eye tends to encourage a political points-scoring atmosphere. By being out of the way, one is able to be more co-operative and tripartisan. The public do not see us behaving in that way because they only get to see us in the Chamber. I often have to tell constituents that we do constructive work in many other areas that is just not seen.

I have great sympathy with the point made by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) about the way in which members and Chairmen of Select Committees are chosen. At my first meeting of the Information

Committee, I was amused to receive a message saying, "Do not allow yourself to be elected Chairman." There were still wranglings and negotiations about the allocation of the chairmanship and who should get what. In the end, a Government Whip manfully held the position of Chairman until we sorted things out, particularly between Opposition parties. I was then elected to the Chair and I hope that it has worked out appropriately. I believe that it was for the best. That incident opened up to me the Machiavellian world of negotiations that take place behind the scenes about positions, places and Chairs.

Hon. Members have talked about Select Committee places being handed out as some sort of reward or cherry-picking exercise. I was interested to see that the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs is regarded as being in the premier league. In that context, the Home Affairs Committee must be somewhere in the Vauxhall Conference league. At my first meeting of the Home Affairs Committee, I remember the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) saying, quite properly, "As this is the Home Affairs Committee, I hope that we will not be gallivanting around the world because we can find out what we need to find out here." My subsequent experience has shown that he was correct. I have had some interesting trips to Newcastle and Middlesbrough to look at young offenders, but I have not set foot outside the shores of this country on behalf of that Committee.

The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne talked about the publication of information. I can testify to his assiduousness in that, having seen him advancing his point of view in the all-party internet group. I suspect that anoraks' corner, which meets in certain quarters of the Palace to discuss arcane matters of internet usage, is not his natural territory. From the Information Committee's point of view, I can see no technical bar to the publication of the information if it can be put on in the correct format. If *Hansard*, which is a tremendous resource, can be produced the next day, there is no reason why Select Committee testimony could not be put out in a similar way. I sympathise with the right hon. Gentleman's comment about the fact that after three or four weeks, the testimony may no longer be relevant. It is nonsensical for the newspapers and television to be able to broadcast and print the information immediately while we have no authorised version of the uncorrected testimony. It diminishes the impact of those sessions and devalues them tremendously.

In terms of the evolution of Committees, I would be keen to look at how the Select Committees and Standing Committees could be brought together. It is ironic that members of Select Committees often cannot sit on Standing Committees because of a conflict of time when they are the people who have developed expertise. As a new Member, I learned more about home affairs, which is relevant to my work, than ever before during my time on that Committee and it would have been useful to be able to apply that knowledge. Having tried to sit on a Standing Committee and a Select Committee at the same time, I found that the two were incompatible.

In other countries, there are much closer links between Select Committees and Standing Committees, and they are able to hold special committees where Select Committee members do the evidence taking in respect of a particular Bill. I should like to see us evolve far more in that direction and perhaps look at some other models so that the expertise of Select Committee members is applied directly to Government legislation. It may be that the bipartisan atmosphere could also be applied to legislation. That is not always the case in a Standing Committee where Government Back Benchers are encouraged to keep quiet rather than to participate, whoever is in government. That would not happen in a Select Committee. The Government Back Benchers on a Select Committee would get a much better crack at the legislation than they do under the current Standing Committee procedures.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock on initiating the debate and I look forward to hearing the other contributions.

11.56 am

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan). He has learnt a great deal in a short time, and we look forward to hearing his contributions as he grows in experience and maturity—I hope that he does not mind me saying that. By contrast, I have been here for almost 20 years, 18 of which I spent on the Front Bench. I was a member of the shadow Cabinet from 1985, I was a member of the national executive committee of the Labour party and, as Chief Whip, I was one of the four officers of the parliamentary Labour party. I have been at the centre of my party's affairs for a substantial time.

I was one of those Machiavellian creatures who fixed all the appointments. As I came towards the end of my career, I saw the light and began to think that perhaps the Whips should not be involved in those appointments. Fortunately, I did not see the light sufficiently quickly to do anything about it. However, it is right to say that it would be better if the Whips were not involved. I can say that now that I have no responsibility. It would be very much more difficult to take that view as Chief Whip. That point is worth listening to and I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) has raised this subject.

I had my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock with me in the Whips Office for only one year. He was absolutely outstanding. That man is a Chief Whip's nightmare and the only way to deal with him is to put him in the Whips Office. He was fine when he was with me, but he decided that he wanted to leave.

Mr. David Davis: He went native.

Mr. Foster: Yes. All the best people in this place are a Chief Whip's nightmare. They are the really valuable people, not those on the Front Bench. We can get Front Benchers ten a penny—I hope that they do not mind me saying so. In fact, a tenth of a penny is all that some of them are worth. The awkward squad are the really valuable people in this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) gave me untold trouble. At one time, he was intending to get himself thrown out of the Chamber every Tuesday and Thursday at Prime Minister's Question Time. I had him in my office every Tuesday and Thursday and, fortunately, I managed to dissuade him from using that nuclear weapon that he was intending to let off. When I failed to persuade him on one occasion, I had to send him to then leader of the Labour party, Neil Kinnock, who is now a European Commissioner, and he succeeded in persuading him.

[Mr. Foster]

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow felt passionately that what was going on was wrong and that he was not able to draw attention to the truth. He believed that there was no parliamentary device that allowed him to do so. Of course, being my hon. Friend, he had notified the press that he was to be thrown out of the Chamber, so the press were anticipating that. He was going to hold a press conference and reveal all. However, it never quite happened. It was all to do with the Falklands war, of course, and the sinking of the Belgrano.

I remember on one occasion saying to my hon. Friend, "I want you in the Chamber, Tam." Some very important debate was going on. I said, "You of all people would not miss the sinking of your Belgrano." I think that it was the day when we forced a motion of no confidence and when Mrs. Thatcher resigned. My hon. Friend wanted to be away somewhere. I said, "No, Tam, everyone must be here on this day and you must be there to sink your Belgrano." Of course, we did not sink her. She—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman because the House is enjoying his remarks, but I have not yet identified the thread that leads to Select Committee reform.

Mr. Foster: If there was not a thread, I will try to invent one now. The thread is that this place is supremely important. It is more important than Governments. We have all fought in this place to establish our freedoms and to bring Governments under control. No Government likes to be brought under control. The only way in which we can do so is to have the courage and confidence to tell the truth to one another. Unfortunately, some of my colleagues on the Labour Benches think that one crawls one's way into office. The best people kick their way into office. They then become very substantial figures in their own right.

I remember one thing that I said in my first speech after I left the Government, after only 36 hours. It was a period of great emotion for me. I said that this place must never be the Prime Minister's poodle. Unfortunately, it has become so. The only people who can reclaim it are my colleagues on the Labour Back Benches. They ought to have the courage to take on the Government, to tell the truth, and to say to Ministers, "You are wrong. All right, I may not get a job, but so what? There is an alternative career as a Back Bencher or a Chairman of a Select Committee. You are wrong and we are going to bring you to account." They should have the courage to say that whether it is to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister or whoever within the Government.

The Prime Minister, we recall, is the primus inter pares. He is not a president. In other words, I am as good as the Prime Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock is as good as the Prime Minister. Our colleagues on the Opposition Benches are as good as the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is the primus inter pares and Parliament operates only when we make that work. Sadly, we ourselves have presided over the demise of Parliament. We ought not to blame the press or the Government. We ought to blame ourselves and we ought to say from this moment forward, "Let us reclaim the territory that we have lost and bring Governments to account because that is our constitutional right and duty. We cannot represent the people by any other means."

12.4 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster). I shall be brief because I know that the Front-Bench spokesmen want to wind up in about four or five minutes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on initiating this debate. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) has said, it comes at an appropriate time because the Modernisation Committee is considering these matters and how Parliament can best use its time, and the Procedure Committee, which I chair, is similarly engaged in considering how the House, through its procedures, can most effectively operate.

I am sorry that in 1992, the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland did not hold the views that he holds today. Perhaps if he had, I would have remained the Chairman of the Health Select Committee—a job that I very much enjoyed and which I hope that I did effectively on behalf of the House. As the right hon. Gentleman has said, the Select Committees do not operate on behalf of the Labour party, new or old, the Conservative and Unionist party or the Liberal Democrat party. They operate on behalf of the House of Commons. I know that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) shares my view that the Select Committee system is the only effective way in which the House of Commons can hold the Government of the day to account not only in respect of spending money, but in respect of policy. Therefore, the reform of the system to give the Select Committees more power and authority is absolutely right.

Similarly, it is right, proper and important that the Select Committees should have the resources in terms of staff and specialist advice to enable them to do their job properly. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden said, the work of the Government in relation to the European Union is massive. So it is important that the Select Committees should have the staff, expertise and technical support to enable them to do on behalf of the House what is necessary to hold the Executive to account.

The changes that were made by Norman St. John Stevas, now Lord St. John of Fawsley, in 1979–80 were absolutely right. While there was reservation in the House at the time about those reforms, they have proved extremely important for the House and have enabled Back-Bench Members of Parliament to hold whichever Government are in power to account in a more effective way.

I share the views of the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland and of the hon. Member for Thurrock. The hon. Member for Thurrock has proved himself to be a thoroughly effective, efficient, successful and outstanding Back-Bench Member of Parliament. He has done the job that those who elected him as Member of Parliament for Thurrock intended him to do. He is held in high regard, although he has not had what I would call a lasting Front-Bench appointment. There needs to be in this place an alternative career. Back Benchers can have those alternative careers. They do not have to become Ministers to be effective Members of Parliament. They can become effective Members of the House by becoming specialists, and members and Chairmen of Select Committees. Perhaps in future those roles will be rewarded in a more effective and meaningful way than they are today.

They are very important. Parliament could not operate without effective Back-Bench Members of Parliament. If it did, we would have a dictatorship.

The hon. Member for Thurrock has done a great service to the House by initiating the debate today. I wish him success and hope that he and I can continue to play, from our different positions in the House, an effective role on behalf of the House of Commons in holding the Government of the day, whether of my party or his, to account. Without our doing that, Parliament would be a mockery.

12.9 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): We have had a most outstanding debate in the past hour and nine minutes. I shall do my best not to lower the tone. It is good to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). For more than a quarter of a century, we were Back Benchers. I think that I can say without sounding conceited or boastful that neither of us was ever afraid to try to hold the Government to account. I always took the line that I was never prepared to accept the constraints of office in order to achieve office, and it is a pity that more hon. Members do not take that line.

We have heard some outstanding speeches this morning, and we are all grateful to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), who is an exemplary Back-Bench Member, for introducing the debate in the way that he did. He was both provocative and thoughtful in the best tradition of parliamentary democracy. We also heard an unforgettable speech from the former Mr. Fix-it, the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster). As I listened to him, I could not help but think that there is more joy in the House of Commons over one Whip that repenteth—it really was a tour de force. In that brief speech, he encapsulated what the debate is about and what the House should be about.

When the Opposition initiated a debate on 7 July, in the midst of the Sierra Leone episode, we did not debate that matter specifically, but discussed the position and rights of Select Committees, and the hon. Member for Thurrock made a distinguished speech. When I wound up that debate, I quoted, to the hilarity of some Labour Members, Colonel Dunning's famous motion of 1780, which said that the power of the Crown had increased, was increasing and should be diminished. Today, the power of the Executive has increased, is increasing and needs to be diminished, especially in a Parliament where the Government have a steamroller majority and can get their way, regardless of the sense of the argument, or the equity or justice of the cause.

In such a Parliament, it is crucial that the Prime Minister and—I hope, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, whom we welcome today—will respond to the debate in like spirit. It is essential that the Prime Minister tries to emulate Gladstone, who set up the Public Accounts Committee, two of whose distinguished Chairmen we have heard from today. Gladstone was a man of immense power, great prestige and stature, who knew that those qualities could only be added to, and not detracted from, by allowing the Chamber to have a proper say in calling Government to account. I hope that it was in that spirit—indeed, I believe that it was so—that the departmental Select Committees were set up almost 20 years ago. We must all recognise that Ministers are answerable to Parliament and that Parliament is not answerable to Ministers.

We must recognise that more of our influence and authority has inevitably passed, in this television age, to those smaller Rooms where Select Committees meet, where arguments can be examined on their merits—as many hon. Members have pointed out—and the narrow partisanship that is sometimes so evident in the Chamber can be put to one side. Select Committees have an especially crucial role to play for the House. They are not the creature of Government, but are answerable to this House; they are appointed by this House. How glad I was to hear repentance from the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, who said that the manner of appointment of Select Committees was perhaps not correct. How right it is that we should try to ensure that Select Committee chairmanships are not merely regarded as a reward for someone who has missed out on being a Minister, or has been sacked from a ministerial post. It is important that people are selected for their merits.

The hon. Member for Thurrock rightly made the point—which was echoed by other right hon. and hon. Members—that there should be an alternative career ladder in this place. No greater honour can befall any man or woman of this country than to be elected to this House, and it grieves me that Parliament is so sniped at and denigrated by the fourth estate, which sometimes seems hellbent on destroying the other three. When a man or woman is elected to this House with aspirations to office, those aspirations are more properly fixed on the chairmanship of a Select Committee and on serving the House than on anything else. I do not advocate the separation of powers that exists in the United States and other countries, but Congress provides for the aspiring American public servant an opportunity that is not as readily appreciated in this country as it should be.

I totally agree with those who have argued—as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) in a notable speech—for extra resources for Select Committees. It is nonsense that the Chairman of a Select Committee who is going to an important event should have to wait in a taxi queue, but it is far greater nonsense that the resources to match the resources of Ministries are not available, in some degree, to the Chairmen and members of Select Committees. There should be greater devotion of resources to those Committees.

It is also right that we should debate the findings of Select Committees on the Floor of the House. I was so glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden and others talked about the Chamber in the way that they did. It is a great pity that people will not have the chance to read about this debate in the press tomorrow. The way in which Parliament is being sidelined, not only by the Government, but by the media, is scandalous. People's faith in this place would be reinforced somewhat if they had the opportunity to know about the quality and content of debates such as this one.

I believe that, unless we can put this place back as the forum and cockpit of the nation, we shall fail in our duty as parliamentarians. Although I accept that it is entirely right and proper that the Modernisation Committee should consider such innovative ideas as the Main Committee, I remain unconvinced about that issue. However, whether or not that Committee comes into existence, it cannot, must not and should never replace the Chamber.

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

Life would be brought back to the Chamber if we had more debates about the findings of our Select Committee colleagues.

In that context, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden made the extremely good suggestion that, perhaps on a Monday, a half hour or an hour should be set aside for such debates. There is no reason why that should not be done. The parliamentary managers should be able to find that time, and if that means that we sit until 11 o'clock on Monday evenings—so what? Let us have a regular slot when Select Committee findings can be presented to the House, because those Committees and their Chairmen are answerable to the House, and Ministers are then answerable, before the House, to the Select Committees.

I do not make these points to the Parliamentary Secretary in a partisan spirit; I should make precisely the same points from the Government Back Benches, as many hon. Members will be aware. We need a system that more properly and adequately holds Ministers to account. Parliament has two prime functions: one is to scrutinise legislation minutely and properly, but the other—which is more important, because it goes beyond legislation—is to make Ministers properly answerable to Parliament. They should be able to defend their every action and, of course, their estimates.

I end on that point, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Thurrock and by others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden: Select Committees should have a greater say in the expenditure of the public's money. It is not the Government's money; it is the taxpayer's money, and to say that only those who are in government should have total control over expenditure and priorities is wrong. If we could do something to change matters along the lines that have been suggested, it would be a complete vindication of the excellent service that the hon. Member for Thurrock has performed today by initiating the debate.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I listened with a great deal of interest, and sometimes amusement, to the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) made. He described himself as cussed and difficult, and took the opportunity to "bounce ideas" around the Chamber. He can tell his friend and ministerial colleague whom he did not identify that, although he may not have had the opportunity to enjoy trips abroad with the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, he certainly enjoyed himself today. The entire Chamber enjoyed his speech.

Many points were made during the debate and I shall try to answer some of them. I shall reflect on the others, but, as the House knows, the issue concerns the House as well as the Government. I expect those hon. Members with more experience than I, who have powerful voices and positions, to continue this debate elsewhere in the Palace of Westminster. Many themes emerged and I shall discuss three of those before coming to the specific points.

First, strong support was expressed on both sides of the Chamber for the Select Committee system. Everyone believes that it has a strong foundation and no one advocated major change. Hon. Members want to improve the system and many suggestions were made about how to go about that. The system is not static—it has changed and it will continue to change. The mood of the House today reflects a desire to see quicker change. Let me reflect on two or three changes.

Within this Parliament, the Select Committee structure has been changed slightly to mirror the new departmental structures. An Environmental Audit Committee has been set up and, importantly, a new Human Rights Committee will soon be set up to monitor new legislation. The big change, which no one has mentioned in great depth this morning, is the move to encourage and enable Select Committees to carry out pre-legislative scrutiny. Someone said that the Social Security Committee had looked at the pensions splitting on divorce Bill. There will shortly be opportunities for Select Committees to examine, for example, the new food standards agency. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) knows, a Committee will also have opportunities to look at asylum and immigration procedures, and I hope that he will be involved. Inevitably, that pre-legislative scrutiny will lead to changes in Select Committee structure.

Secondly, I was slightly amused at the discussion about the need for bipartisanship. The House is very much into pantomime and yah-boo politics. I thought that I heard an increasing echo of people saying that they wanted a new consensual approach to politics—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] When hon. Members are challenged with that, their voices change, but I had the impression that hon. Members were saying that bipartisanship should be encouraged.

Thirdly and most importantly, hon. Members were conscious of the importance of creative tension between Back Benchers and the Select Committee system, and the Government. We can all benefit from that creative tension. There is nothing to be frightened about. I hope that the call for greater openness expressed in the Chamber this morning will be heard. Greater openness is one of the Government's aims.

A number of specific points have been made and I shall deal with two or three of them. A strong call was made for greater status for Select Committee reports, members and Chairmen. Like many other hon. Members, I listen regularly to the "Today" programme and I have reached the conclusion that the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee is in residence there. He is there almost every day because he pursues the Select Committee's line. His status arises from the Select Committee's achievements. We need to back Select Committees and ensure that their status arises from their achievements.

Extra resources for Select Committees were called for. Ultimately, that is a matter for the House of Commons Commission, with which some hon. Members present today are involved, but extra resources have been made available in the past. I understand that resources are available, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) said, there is never a difficulty in getting specialist advisers because it is regarded as an honour to work for a Select Committee. However, there may be a case for looking again at the issue of special assistants who advise Select Committees.

I want to spend a few minutes discussing the points made by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), and his predecessor about expenditure. In a sense, my right hon. Friend the Member for

Ashton-under-Lyne partly wound up the debate. He stressed that, with imagination, Select Committees could do many things and that in many ways they were not constrained. I hope that Select Committees will take a longer look at expenditure. I agree entirely with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden that much more needs to be done to make the Executive accountable for their expenditure. Resource accounting will help, as will a measurement of output and a focus on input. However, I see no reason why Select Committees should not be able to call Ministers before them and examine the issues that he discussed.

I am conscious that I have very little time in which to respond, so I shall discuss just two other issues. The first is the need to ensure that evidence is available quickly, not just to hon. Members, but to the wider public. There is a case for quicker production of reports and, in extreme cases, evidence can be made available quickly. Furthermore, when Select Committees are recorded and videoed, a tape can be produced immediately. However, the use of new technology should be explored to ensure that evidence is available quickly.

Secondly, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock mentioned witnesses giving evidence on oath. We must bear it in mind that appearing before a Select Committee is difficult. Ministers are grilled, but people from the outside are grilled too and we must be careful how we handle those people.

I am conscious that I have made no specific pledges, but I hope that the tone of my remarks is sympathetic. I shall ensure that hon. Members' comments are made available to a wider audience. Change has occurred and will occur, and I hope that we shall establish a system in which the whole House feels that Select Committee views are heard.

Post Office

12.30 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the subject of the Post Office. I have regularly submitted my name in the ballot for the past three months on this item, so I am obviously very pleased to have secured a place in today's Adjournment debates. It is particularly apposite because the Select Committee on Trade and Industry reported on Monday and, this week, the Post Office has made an important overseas purchase, on which I shall touch later.

The Post Office is an important and massive business. We must remind ourselves time and again that, through its four main operations—the Royal Mail, Parcelforce, Post Office Counters Ltd. and Subscription Services Ltd.—it employs 190,000 people and has a turnover in excess of £6.7 billion. It is facing increasing, serious competition from overseas rivals, as well as pressures from the growth of fax and electronic mail services. There is also the prospect of greater liberalisation through the European Union.

To me and several others, it has been clear for some time that such a situation could not be maintained indefinitely without losing market share—notwithstanding the announcement by the previous Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), just before Christmas. A publicly owned and financed business that is subject to all the traditional constraints on pay, pricing, acquisitions, borrowing, partnerships and joint ventures has become increasingly at odds with the commercial world.

As the previous Secretary of State announced just before Christmas, postal administrations in countries such as Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Switzerland are already benefiting from much greater commercial freedom. The Dutch postal business, KPN, has bought the private sector carrier TNT, which operates in this country and throughout the world, for the massive sum of 2 billion Australian dollars. Such sums will be necessary if we are to create a world player in our Post Office. The German post office has bought a 20 per cent. share in DHL, for which it also paid a substantial sum.

In both the Netherlands and Germany, and in France, the machinery and rules of the European Union are being used to strengthen their postal organisations before they are fully or partially privatised. It is certain that, when the European Union directive on postal markets starts to work fully, direct mail and cross-border services will be open to more direct competition. Unless we are very careful, our rivals will be better placed to utilise and take advantage of it.

It is with regret that I say that the previous Government did not reach a final conclusion on these challenges. I felt at times that they should have gone much further, although I plead in mitigation the obvious lack of a substantial parliamentary majority. This Government cannot plead that. The decisions announced in the House by the former Secretary of State on 7 December 1998 show that the Government are fundamentally divided on the way in which to proceed. Signs of a major quarrel between the Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry were all over his statement. The

"radical new form of public sector enterprise"—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 22.]—

[Mr. Richard Page]

that he announced, in which a minority shareholding in a prospective public limited company can be sold, and which allows for an exchange of equity with other businesses, is a slogan, not a solution. As the Communications Workers Union pointed out in September,

"a minority share sale would amount to privatisation for all practical purposes".

It would have been far better to acknowledge that outright last month and to follow the union's logic, instead of cobbling together yet another policy fudge.

I understand why the former Secretary of State could not do so. With the Chancellor to his left, the former Paymaster General, the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), to his right and Charlie Whelan ahead of him, it would have been the political equivalent of the charge of the Light Brigade. But the political landscape has changed; the Government have suffered a few casualties, and the new Secretary of State has only the wounded figure of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to tackle.

If rumour is right, the new Secretary of State is looking over this terrain again before the publication of the forthcoming White Paper. That is one of the reasons why I was so pleased to be able to secure today's debate. I hope that the White Paper will address the questions raised in the Select Committee report on the degree of control that the DTI will have over Post Office borrowing and the scale envisaged.

All that is second best to my principal hope that the new Secretary of State, unlike his predecessor, will have the courage to accept that the only way in which our Post Office will compete effectively with its European and global rivals is to set it free—just as the previous Government had the courage to set free British Telecom—to transform itself from a national player to a major contender on the world stage, just as BT has done.

I shall give a few simple examples of the problems facing our Post Office and what the Government's policies will entail if they remain unchanged. On Monday, the Post Office purchased the German Parcel Company, the third largest carrier in the Federal Republic, which has annual sales of £250 million. We do not know what the Post Office paid for it—it wants the matter to remain commercially confidential—although estimates in the press range from £200 million to £300 million.

Even with the reduction of the Government's dividend from Post Office profits from an average of 80 per cent. in recent years to 40 per cent., which I welcome, such a transaction will inevitably affect the Post Office's capacity to invest in its automation and development programme—unless, of course, the money comes directly from the Treasury. We do not know whether that will be so. If such sums come directly from the Treasury, we must ask about accountability. We might ask what other sums are earmarked for future purchases. To operate in such a way is a recipe for confusion. Let us not forget that the purchase, which I welcome and on which I congratulate the Post Office, is only the start of creating a world-class, worldwide postal business. Entrées into the Spains, Italys and Frances of this world must be found and funded. That is when we shall start to talk about serious sums of money.

I remember being in the House when, before BT was privatised, it announced that it wanted £2 billion for an investment programme. We ran around in circles trying to facilitate that within Treasury rules. There was talk of Busby bonds, and all sorts of alternatives were examined. At the end of the day, the only way that BT could get its money for expansion was through privatisation.

Private companies operating within national borders will be purchased at an increasing premium as major players strive for world positions. To put it bluntly, it will get harder and harder for the Post Office to make further acquisitions under the rules of external financing that were announced in December. Internally, Post Office revenues will fall by several millions of pounds when the adjustment to the Rheims agreement is made. I shall not go into the details of the Rheims agreement suffice it to say that it is an arcane form of internal and exterior movements of mail. It boils down to—the figure is from two years ago—the enhancement of the Royal Mail's profits by £40 million. Following the adjustment, we shall lose that amount, and probably more. All that will restrict the Post Office's ability to expand.

Anyone discussing the commercial freedom or privatisation of the Post Office is told that such moves would put daily deliveries at risk throughout the country, that it would affect the universal price for letters and that the network of rural post offices would face extinction. I do not believe that. We heard exactly the same alarmist scare stories from the same sources when BT was privatised. Were we not told that prices would soar, and that country telephone boxes would go? What do we have now? We have more telephone boxes, new operators and competing services—which benefit the public, as consumers, more than ever before—along with much lower prices.

I believe that greater freedom—indeed, privatisation, with the spur of competition from other providers—will bring comparable gains to our Post Office. At the same time—and this is the underlying raison d'etre of all that I am saying—it will bring about the creation of our Post Office as a world player. I think that, if the right measures are adopted, that can be achieved alongside the maintenance of a nationwide postal service. I am not here to outline Conservative party policy, but I am sure that Conservative Members are as committed as anyone to a universal service and to sustaining a viable network of rural post offices, whatever method of privatisation may be employed.

Inevitably, there will be changes in the location and number of post offices. Although 28 million people use rural post offices every week, the number in operation has fallen from 20,000 to 18,000 in the past few years. It is a brutal commercial fact of life that a minimum amount of business must be done in a post office if it is to be viable, and that minimum rises every year. New policies must be devised if the sub-post office is to give its postmaster or postmistress a decent living, and also provide the local community with a wide range of services. I know that the aim of the sub-post office movement is the creation of a bank in every village, and I want that as well.

I would be more confident about the Government's assurances to sub-post office operators last month had they not so far failed to commit themselves to the Horizon platform for automation. Perhaps the Minister will announce such a commitment today; if he does, I shall be delighted. If he says that the last Government made no

such commitment, I shall roll over and say that I entirely agree. The fact is, however, that no one wants a future of indefinitely diminishing returns and ever-lengthening hours for the operators of sub-post offices, but, unless changes are made, that is a real danger.

The prospect of a Post Office obliged to submit its strategic plans to the Department of Trade and Industry, subject to Treasury approval for its borrowing to finance new investment and operating without "undue cross-subsidy"—whatever that delicate phrase means—between Royal Mail and Parcelforce, with employees paid within the necessary context of public-sector pay policies, is frankly disappointing. It constitutes a return to the way in which the state-owned organisation was run in the past, and from that it will be only a short step to the lunchtime directive. It represents a false and not a new dawn. Realistically, can any hon. Member envisage the Treasury giving our Post Office enough money to purchase an organisation such as TNT? A purchase of that kind, however, is necessary if the Post Office is to move into the world market.

I see nothing wrong with an open and transparent accounting system, or an independent regulatory system to ensure standards of service and fair competition, and I know that that is what the private operators in the sector want. Without change, we shall have a Post Office with its hands tied behind its back, exposed to increasing competition, particularly from European postal organisations. I realise that the Minister cannot pre-empt the White Paper which I hope will soon be before us, but I hope he accepts that what I suggest would benefit the Post Office in the long term, and that the status quo is not a long-term option.

12.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): I congratulate the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on securing the debate, and am happy to respond. If I did not remember the hon. Gentleman's record as a Minister responsible for the Post Office, I would not disagree with much that he said; but he has a record of failure as long as his arm. I would not have mentioned that if the hon. Gentleman had not been rather churlish in his speech about the steps taken by the Government so far—first to deal with the shambles that the hon. Gentleman left us, and secondly to introduce measures for the future of the Post Office in a sophisticated way, involving all the stakeholders who use it daily as ordinary customers or as business customers for whom it is a major distributor.

The reforms announced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) on 7 December 1998 broke the deadlock with which the last Government left us. They give us a real opportunity to provide the Post Office with commercial freedoms. The hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire was, in fact, responsible for the Post Office on two occasions: one would have been bad enough, but he returned for a second bite at the cherry. He claims that he was always in favour of reform, but he never achieved it. His party enjoyed a majority in the House for 18 years, and, owing to an intellectual straitjacket, the only show in town was the privatisation of the Post Office. The Conservatives allowed it to float away in the ether, which damaged management, personal relationships and the Post Office's economic future, and offered a prospect that was wholeheartedly rejected time and again by the British people, and by management and workers in the Post Office.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire is known in the Department of Trade and Industry as "Swag-bag Page". As a Minister, he was responsible for the second biggest hike in the external financing limit ever imposed by the Government. He took 91 per cent. of post-tax profits in 1995–96, and came back for a second bite in 1996–97. That money—91p in every pound—was money that the Post Office needed to invest in new opportunities, here and throughout Europe. It was hamstrung by a Minister who handed the money over to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, who squandered it rather than investing it in postal and telecommunications services.

There was chaos. Industrial relations were in turmoil, with 810,900 days lost through industrial relations in the second year during which the hon. Gentleman was a Minister. It has taken the present Government to resolve the position, securing a 1,800 per cent. reduction in the number of days lost through industrial action.

Not one joint venture was established with the Post Office on either occasion when the hon. Gentleman was a Minister. Since I have been the Minister responsible, I have established a number of joint ventures. The Post Office has acquired a stake in a Swedish mail delivery company, linked up with a Dutch letters and parcels delivery company, established a joint venture for the catering arm and, in conjunction with Microsoft, launched a service enabling customers to receive paper mail sent electronically. Since day one of their inheritance, the Government have sought proactively to establish a new framework for the Post Office, and new opportunities for it to compete here and abroad.

I am grateful to the Trade and Industry Select Committee for the timely publication on Monday of its report following an evidence session on 9 December. The memorandum summarising the main points that the Committee expects to see in the White Paper is helpful in itself. I hope that I can be as successful in meeting the Committee's expectations as we were in fulfilling the recommendations of the report that it published this time last year.

The Post Office is a great national institution, on which we all rely. It delivers post to every address in the United Kingdom each working day, handles more than 70 million letters per day, is beaten only by Coca-Cola as the most strongly recognised brand image, and has more than 19,000 post offices in the UK. Almost 60 per cent. of villages have a post office; only 5 per cent. have a bank. The Post Office is visited 28 million times a week on average—half the UK population. No wonder the Tories wanted to privatise such a special asset, owned by the British people.

We want the Post Office to remain one of the great success stories of the UK, contributing to the commercial success of other businesses, providing the modern communications infrastructure that we need commercially and socially, and contributing to the social cohesion of our nation. I trust that Conservative Members share that desire. Indeed, the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire went out of his way to say that that was the case. It is just that his policies in government failed to meet those challenges. It has been up to this Government

[Mr. Ian McCartney]

to meet them effectively. We are keen to put in place as quickly as possible the reform package that was announced last month.

I want to put in place three main pillars of the reform package by the middle of the year at the latest. First, we shall publish a White Paper putting flesh on the bones of the announcement on 7 December by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool. The hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire is right; I will not pre-empt that in the debate.

The White Paper will redefine the relationship between the Government and the Post Office, as well as explain our plans for implementing the comprehensive reform package. I look forward to positive contributions in response to the White Paper by anyone and everyone who is interested in providing genuine commercial freedoms to the Post Office.

Secondly, we will implement the European Union postal services directive. We will introduce regulations under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972, enabling us to ensure early implementation of significant parts of the reform package, especially the establishment of an independent regulator. Thirdly, we will agree with the Post Office the strategic plan, which will form an essential part of the new arm's-length relationship between the Government and the Post Office Board.

The hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire raised the issue of the Horizon automation project. The Government are committed totally to the project. The deep-seated problems over the project—I do not mean the comment in a personal way—were inherited from the previous Administration, who failed to deal adequately with the introduction of such a complex programme.

We are absolutely committed to providing a modern, secure, convenient and cost-effective means of paying benefits to customers. That is what the benefit payment card has been designed to do, and it remains our objective. However, we have been concerned at the substantial delays that have been suffered by the Horizon project, mainly due to the previous Administration. We continue actively to monitor its progress.

The Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. continue to work closely with the supplier, ICL Pathway, to resolve the problems. The Government remain committed to a nationwide network of post offices and to ensuring those benefit customers who wish to do so can continue to draw their benefits in cash at post offices.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire also talked about German Parcel. I will try to be as helpful as I can in relation to that. We can all be proud about that achievement. Within weeks of the Government giving greater commercial freedoms to the Post Office, it was able to acquire German Parcel. That signals a big step forward in achieving the Post Office's strategic objective to become one of the top global distribution companies.

As the hon. Gentleman said, German Parcel is the third largest private carrier in Germany and a major shareholder in General Parcel, an international company which operates throughout 30 European countries. Therefore, it is important that that exciting new venture is a success for the Post Office. It provides an early demonstration that, with the new freedoms of the reform package that we have announced, our Post Office can respond much more effectively to the opportunities of a changing and dynamic international marketplace to provide wider and better services to meet the growing demands and needs of its customer base.

Many other European post offices have already invested in substantial acquisitions and strategic alliances, so the Post Office is coming from a long way back. Therefore, we have to respond in a way that ensures that, in that dynamic marketplace, the Post Office can secure with some certainty acquisitions in which it has an interest.

The Post Office has shown that it can do that by that particular acquisition. That will become ever more vital as the postal market becomes increasingly globalised and competitive. That significant international acquisition shows the commitment of both the Government and the new Post Office Board to move quickly to implement the agreed reforms, and gives the lie to those who questioned the Government's commitment to their new policy for a public sector organisation.

I know that the Post Office has faced calls to disclose how much it is paying for German Parcel; the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire alluded to that in a reasonable way. Of course, the public, as owners, should be aware of Post Office investments and financial commitments and the Government should be as transparent as possible in their dealings, but not in ways that might unduly damage the Post Office's prospects for commercial success. No owner would want that.

As I said, I hope that I can be helpful. The estimated turnover of German Parcel for the current year is around £265 million. A normal core price for such an acquisition might be the annual turnover plus any special assets, so that should give a good idea of the figure in question, but I stress that other publicly and privately owned European post offices are making acquisitions and, in most instances, we do not know how much they are paying. They do not say; nor do they intend to say.

For commercial reasons, our Post Office would dearly like to know what the costs of those other acquisitions are, so we are not going to hand on a plate to Deutsche Post or other serious competitors the figure paid for German Parcel; nor do I think that the hon. Gentleman would wish us to do so.

The figures in question will properly be reflected in both published Government and Post Office accounts, and any adjustments to the Post Office external financing limits will be announced in the normal way, but such publication will not necessarily reveal the details of any particular commercially confidential deal. The Post Office investment in German Parcel will stand on its own two feet and we fully expect it to pay for itself.

I return to the reforms. The package is radical. It presents the best way forward. Reviews under the previous Government failed to give the Post Office greater freedoms or disciplines. Instead, they left it in limbo and, as a result, starved it of investment. As I have said, the hon. Gentleman played a major part in that starving of investment. Our review gives the Post Office the commercial freedom that it needs.

Pursuing wholesale privatisation, as set out by the hon. Gentleman, was not an option; nor is it an option. It could have put large parts of the network under threat.

Because of the need for primary legislation, it would have created a long period of uncertainty, which would have seen the Post Office's market further undermined at home and abroad.

The reform package has several essential elements. One is the new arm's-length relationship. The Government's role in the Post Office will be restricted to the strategic level, both on matters of commercial direction and on setting social objectives. The Post Office Board will become clearly accountable for its success or failure in running the business. We will require the Post Office to present a rolling five-year strategic plan each year for approval by Government. That is essential to protect taxpayers' interests.

Another is the new regulatory regime, which, as I have said, will be substantially set out in the White Paper. In setting that out, we will clearly show the direction the Government will want taken in terms of greater resources for investment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool has already set out moves on the external financing limits. We decided to change those for the Post Office for next year—1999–2000—to £207 million from the provisional figure of £335 million. That will be about 50 per cent. of post-tax profits, down from the 91 per cent. that was introduced by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire. In subsequent years, it will fall to 40 per cent. of post-tax profits. That will give great incentive to the Post Office to be even more successful than it has been already under the present Administration.

Visitors' Visas

1 pm

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I welcome this debate on visitors' visas. I have wanted to initiate such a debate for the past 12 years, and am happy that I can do so today.

I shall raise issues primarily, if not exclusively, of procedure, not of policy. I realise that two Departments have responsibility for the matter—the Home Office, which sets policy, and the Foreign Office, which administers the procedure on behalf of the Home Office. I support the Government's immigration policy, which is designed to ensure firmness and fairness in immigration.

I am delighted to note that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office is to reply to the debate because he is one of the Government's most outstanding members, and has knowledge of the issues that I shall raise. He has dealt with immigration cases because, like me and other hon. Members, he has many members of the Asian community in his constituency. I shall concentrate on the Indian sub-continent, and specifically on how visas are issued to visitors from it.

I welcome the Government's commitment to the re-establishment of a right of appeal. I spoke to the Home Office today, and am aware that it will take some time before the Bill dealing with the matter is published. I am aware also that it will take some time for it to be enacted. Meanwhile, thousands of my constituents, and thousands of people in other constituencies, are directly affected by the way in which the procedure is operated.

I should make it clear also that we are talking not about settlement but simply about people who wish to come to the United Kingdom to visit relatives. They may wish to be here to attend weddings or funerals, or to visit as tourists, but they do not want to settle here. The debate is therefore quite different from a debate or discussion on asylum or on any other aspect of immigration policy. The people about whom I am speaking want to come here to visit relatives. When their holiday is finished, they wish to return to the sub-continent.

It is worth reminding the House of the size of the Asian community in the United Kingdom. According to the population census, there are currently in the United Kingdom 937,000 people of Indian origin, 552,500 people of Pakistani origin, 203,000 people of Bangladeshi origin, 177,000 people of Chinese origin, and 216,000 people classified as "other Asian". The total United Kingdom population of Asian origin is about 2.85 million, which is a very large number of people. They are concentrated in our major conurbations, such as Leicester, Slough, Tower Hamlets and Birmingham.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): And Leeds.

Mr. Vaz: Indeed; I thank the Minister for reminding me of that.

Members of the Asian community wish—we all have wishes—to ensure that they can see their relatives, that their relatives are able to be granted a visa relatively quickly and that their relatives are treated well while being interviewed.

[Mr. Vaz]

I have worked out that the Asian population in 32 parliamentary constituencies exceeds 10 per cent. of the electorate. Therefore, many constituencies are affected by the issue. The effect on our constituents of decisions made by entry clearance officers in places such as Bombay, New Delhi and elsewhere on the sub-continent is profound. Each week, at my surgery in Leicester—other hon. Members on both sides of the House will share the experience—constituent after constituent complains about the visa system. They are distressed, anxious and bewildered by the system. Sometimes they do not have the necessary information. They come to surgeries with a refusal notice that is very blunt and not particularly detailed, and expect their Member of Parliament to be able to wave a magic wand to ensure that their relatives are able to come into the United Kingdom.

I believe that the job of hon. Members is to stand in the shoes of their constituents, to accept what they say and to take that information and send it on to the entry clearance officer. We can then hope that the entry clearance officer will be able to review the case and—of course, to satisfy our constituent—grant a visa. Hon. Members therefore speak to the sponsors, unlike entry clearance officers, in countries on the sub-continent, who speak to applicants. There is a general assumption that the applicant will visit the person sponsoring him or her and that there is contact between the two.

I do not think that I have had a single case in which I have written to the migration and visa correspondent unit and received a reply containing good news. However, I shall deal later in my speech with the way in which that unit operates.

I have already mentioned the system's effects on relatives in the United Kingdom, but I believe that its effects on people on the sub-continent are even worse. People travel long distances to Dhaka, Bombay, New Delhi or Islamabad to make applications. The application may be refused, and they have to travel back to their home. They may not know what to do about the situation and may rely on the advice of immigration advisers. They may pay money to those advisers, most of whom, I believe, may mislead them. After all that, they will still be unable to enter the United Kingdom.

Subsequently—because of the way in which the United Kingdom visa regime works, and because we are part of the European Community—all of those from the sub-continent who are refused visas to enter the United Kingdom become prisoners of the region and are unable to visit other European countries. When those countries are notified that those people have been refused entry here, it creates a presumption in the minds of those countries that perhaps there is something wrong with those people.

A file is kept on those who are refused visas and even if they apply for a visa again within a year, their case notes will be read. Although we are told that a subsequent application will be considered as fresh and that everything will be reconsidered, I know—just as the Minister and every other hon. Member knows—that the case file will be examined and that the same rejection will be issued. I do not know of one case in which someone has been accepted as a visitor on a second application.

How do hon. Members deal with such cases? We write to the migration and visa correspondence unit. To echo the words of my staff, I should like rename it "the voice mail unit", because my secretary informs me that whenever she rings the unit, she is put on voice mail. She leaves a message and the unit rings her back. I write a letter, and the unit replies. The MVCU sends a standard letter about which there is nothing magical—it acts as a placebo. My three and a half year old son, Luke, can fill in the words on such standard letters. Such is the type of reply that we receive from those working at the MVCU.

We send the letters that we receive from the MVCU to our constituents, who come back to us and say, "That letter contains exactly the same information that was in the refusal notice. There is no new information in it. What is the point of coming to you as my Member of Parliament?"

We need to overhaul the way in which the MVCU operates. It is important that hon. Members should be able to deal with people at that unit who can make decisions. Currently, it is easier for my constituents to fax Bombay, Islamabad or New Delhi, and to receive a fax reply, than it is for me to go through the absurd procedure of having to write to the MVCU, which writes to the post abroad and waits for a reply which is then forwarded to me.

The postcard sent by the MVCU states:

"Our target time for substantive reply is 15 working days. With the current volume of correspondence the actual average time for reply is 25 working days."

It is extraordinary that the unit should admit that there is such a delay.

I have many examples—only two of which I shall deal with today—of waiting ages for a reply to letters that I have written to the MVCU. It has certainly taken longer to receive a reply than 25 days. In one case, I wrote to the MVCU in early July, and again on 30 July, 10 September and 14 September. I received a reply on 23 September. In another case, I wrote on 28 September and received a reply on 3 November. There are many examples that prove that the unit's overall operation does not work.

I should like to highlight the urgent and very important cases in which people have to come to the United Kingdom because a relative is dying in hospital or because they would like to attend a wedding—for the ceremony, not when the ceremony is over. People from the sub-continent, like the rest of us, also would like to be able to visit their friends during the school holidays, not when the holidays are over.

In such urgent cases, hon. Members—who have so many similar cases and tend to react when people get terribly upset—try to get through to a Minister. To be fair to the Under-Secretary, my noble Friend Baroness Symons, she has seen me whenever I have rung, despite her enormous duties. However, I have never had a positive response from our conversations. I now realise why: she believes that the law does not permit her to exercise her discretion to grant a visa when an ECO has said no. Apparently, she has taken legal advice on that. I should be interested to know what my right hon. Friend the Minister thinks.

I recently dealt with a case that I thought very important. A 65-year-old woman called Mrs. Kerai wanted to visit her family in Britain. They had come here from east Africa, settled and had a family. The children

were 21 and 22. The family had never had the chance to go to India because they were working so hard and she had never been to Britain. They wanted to bring her over to show her how much they had achieved.

Poor Mrs. Kerai was not allowed to come here because the ECO in Bombay feared that she was going to settle here. I said that she did not want to settle here. She did not want to stay, despite all the benefits of a new Labour Government. She likes being here to participate in what we have achieved, but she wants to go back at the end of her visit. I was advised that a 65-year-old woman with no husband should apply for settlement, but I repeated that she did not want to settle here. If she withdrew her visa application and applied for settlement, the authorities would assume that she had always intended to settle and could therefore not be granted a visitor's visa.

I went to my noble Friend the Under-Secretary, who said that she would look into the matter. Weeks passed with no response. I had another word with her. More time passed. Eventually I got very irate and threatened to raise the matter in Parliament. There is nothing so effective for ensuring a quick reply. I think that I had the first question tabled for Foreign Office questions that day. I had an immediate call from her private office to tell me that the matter was being looked into and passed to the Home Office. The Home Office approved the granting of a visa within 24 hours of the matter being referred.

Procedurally, we have to deal with Foreign Office Ministers who, on the basis of legal advice, feel that they cannot intervene and exercise their discretion. The cases then go to the Home Office. I do not want Members of Parliament to be treated differently, but if we say that we have met the applicant and the sponsor and know that the applicant will go back in six months and we give all the guarantees in the world—including ensuring that the passport is handed in when the applicant arrives in the United Kingdom and handed back to the post abroad when they return so that officials know that they have come back—any democratically accountable, fair, reasonable and just system should accept that.

I went to Bombay recently on my way back from a holiday in India, where I put those points at my first meeting with Michael Bates, the deputy high commissioner, and the second secretary of immigration. Civil servants and entry clearance officers say that they do what they are asked, but they make judgments based on an interview. Many applicants have to travel many miles and it is the first time that they have had to deal with officialdom. I do not ring Bombay very often—probably only four times a year. If I ring up and say that I know a particular applicant and the sponsor, promise that they will go back and am prepared to give any undertaking that is asked of me, the applicant should be in a better position. Otherwise, we rely totally on an economic basis for immigration law, which was never the intention of immigration policy and should never be the intention of the Government. Officials rightly say that issues should be taken up with Ministers, because they make the law whereas officials only implement it.

My right hon. Friend the Minister understands the problem. It took my office 10 person hours to deal with that one case. We have hundreds of cases to deal with. We cannot know everything about all of them, but there must be accountability to Parliament, and Ministers must be able to listen to colleagues, take advice and make decisions. I do not know what happened in the case that I mentioned—I know only that I got the visa for my constituent. We should not have to go through all that for something so simple and basic.

Until we have an appeal system, my right hon. Friend the Minister needs to consider undertakings and the operation of the MVCU. Why is there not someone at the MVCU who can make the relevant decisions? We cannot keep running to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who is incredibly busy. His portfolio covers about one third of the world. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary has to deal with every consular case. We feel guilty about disturbing them on such issues, but constituents press us to do so. Why do we not have a system that would allow a review in London? If not, let us have a computerised system. Visitors should be put on a computer so that we know where they are. Let us make the sponsors responsible. We should not have to wait for legislation, because this needs to be done now.

I pay tribute to the staff in our posts abroad, who have always been helpful to me. They have hardly ever said yes, but they are always very courteous. However, they will always do what Ministers ask.

I support the continuing campaign for the issuing of visas in the major cities of the sub-continent—places such as Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Lucknow, Sylhet and Lahore. I have canvassed that with Mr. Advani, the Home Office Minister in India, the Indian Prime Minister, and our high commissioner and deputy high commissioner there. They are all favourable to the idea. If we allow visas to be issued, as the Indians and Pakistanis allow them to be issued in Leicester and Birmingham at visa surgeries, and allow our officials to go out to such places, they can verify facts and make the applications much cheaper. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will look into the matter and try to end the misery that has affected so many of our constituents over the years. I know that he has inherited the current policy, but let us try to do something about it before the law changes.

1.16 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on raising the issue. His patience has been rewarded. After a 12-year wait, he has had an opportunity to bring the matter to the attention of the House. In what may sound like a moment of mutual congratulation, I pay tribute to the excellent job that he does for his constituents, raising individual cases and working hard on community issues. I congratulate him on his work and the status that he holds in the community and his constituency.

My hon. Friend has raised some policy issues and some procedural issues. He is right to say that the policy issues are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, but, as he says, it is difficult to disentangle policy from procedure, because the procedure is designed to ensure that the policy is properly and fairly implemented. Our objective throughout has been to ensure the good, fair and open implementation of the immigration rules. My hon. Friend said that he was in favour of the broad policy. The issue is how it is implemented.

My hon. Friend referred to three policy points. First, he rightly pointed out one welcome change in policy since we came to office—the abolition of the primary purpose

[Mr. Derek Fatchett]

rule. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on having had the courage and the principles to take that decision so early in the life of the Government. I have never understood how it was possible for an entry clearance officer to decide the primary purpose of a marriage. I find the process distasteful and I am glad that my constituents and many others do not have to go through it. There are other safeguards in immigration law to stop those who want to use marriage for fraudulent immigration purposes. I welcome the principled decision that was taken in the early days of this Government.

Secondly, my hon. Friend rightly said that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary intends to introduce an appropriate appeals procedure for those who are refused visitors' visas. Again, I welcome that. That right used to exist, but was wrongly taken away by the previous Government. That has made a substantial difference to the work load of Members of Parliament, because we are no longer able to refer particular cases to the appeals procedure. We must take them up through the procedure to which my hon. Friend referred.

If and when the appeals procedure is established, it will not only make the burden of Members of Parliament easier, more manageable and fairer, but will restore the rights of families in the UK and potential visitors to the UK. In addition, it will make a substantial difference to the work load of the migration and visa correspondence unit because a legal right will be established, rather than an administrative process. I share the concerns of my hon. Friend about the loss of the right of appeal on visitors' visas, and I am delighted that the Home Secretary is moving to re-establish that principle.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend referred to a policy issue, not a procedural issue—the question of the word or integrity of a sponsor, and the possibility of a bond scheme arising from sponsorship. He referred to that not just in relation to what I might call ordinary sponsors, but in terms of Members of Parliament who support a particular application.

The Home Secretary has seriously considered a bond scheme as part of the White Paper on asylum and immigration. That is a sensible principle, although the details have yet to be worked out. It is, to me, evident common sense that if an individual of good standing and integrity is prepared to give his or her word—and is prepared to give a bond in some form to support that—that should be taken fully into account.

I feel sorry for the entry clearance officers, my noble Friend the Under-Secretary and those working in the MVCU when they have to write to Members of Parliament to say that there is no question about the integrity of a sponsor. That raises all sorts of important issues about the nature of sponsorship, and I am glad that the Home Secretary is addressing that in the White Paper and in future proposals.

My hon. Friend also referred to procedural issues. It may be useful if I deal with a number of points that flow from those to which he referred. The responsibility that rests with the Foreign Office is to administer the immigration rules fairly and openly to ensure that they are applied with sensitivity and to ensure that each client is dealt with quickly, efficiently and humanely. That is clearly our objective, whether the client applying for a visa comes from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or any other part of the world. We will set ourselves a target, as we have done through the comprehensive spending review and the Department's mission statement, to make sure that we get the best possible service delivery to those applying for visas.

I can give two examples of the way in which we are trying to improve the service in south Asia. My hon. Friend will know—as will other hon. Members from their constituency case work—that, in the past, we have had trouble with information technology in Islamabad. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane)—my own Parliamentary Private Secretary—breaks all the rules by breaking into merry laughter at that point. I understand that the usual function of a PPS is to be seen and not heard, but I assume that the merry laughter was a sign of normal approval and approbation—the function of a PPS.

We have had difficulties with the information technology in Islamabad. My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East will be delighted to know that we have made a substantial investment in Islamabad. Our permanent under-secretary has just visited the post, and we can feel confident now that the new system is working much more effectively. We hope that that will add to the efficiency of the system and will make sure that people are dealt with quickly.

My hon. Friend may wish to know that we are establishing new facilities in Karachi, which I will have the pleasure of opening next month. They should add to the quality and availability of service for applicants. He referred to the MVCU and to some concerns about delays in response to individual cases. First, there is a commitment on our part to recognise the extensive work load of the unit. We have done our best to ensure that there are additional staff, and that the work load is such that it can be handled fairly and effectively.

I note my hon. Friend's points and, as always, we will try to improve the service. I know that Members on both sides of the House are always keen to get the quickest possible reply. I hope that they do not all suffer the misfortune of never getting a positive reply—my hon. Friend's complaint. We will try to improve the service, and I know that my hon. Friend has a meeting arranged with my noble Friend the Under-Secretary. I am sure that they will be able to look at further ways of improving the efficiency of the service.

Mr. Vaz: Do Foreign Office Ministers have the power to exercise discretion on immigration cases?

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend obviously realised the next point that I was going to raise. The simple answer is no. The Foreign Office's responsibility is to administer the procedures. The Home Office's responsibility is to set the policy, and it is Home Office Ministers who have the extra-statutory discretion. My hon. Friend reflected that point well in the way in which he structured his speech—saying that policy matters were the responsibility of the Home Office and procedural matters were the responsibility of the Foreign Office. My noble Friend

Baroness Symons does not have the discretion or the power to overturn decisions. That discretion rests with the Home Office.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Fatchett: I am not sure if it is totally procedurally correct, but I am delighted to give way to my hon. Friend.

Fiona Mactaggart: There is an area where procedure and policy almost go side by side. My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) referred to the case of an elderly woman who wanted to visit. In practice, the procedure means that people over 65 who wish to visit from the sub-continent are almost automatically refused. That is not a matter of policy, but of procedure—and it is one that is causing great distress.

Mr. Fatchett: I understand my hon. Friend's point, and I will certainly bring it to the attention of my noble Friend Baroness Symons. We will make sure that there are clear instructions, so that the procedure does not violate policy in those circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East was right to pay tribute to the staff of the MVCU and I join him in paying tribute to those working in posts abroad. Many have an extremely difficult task—it is physically and administratively demanding—and I would like to put on the record the Government's appreciation of their work. As individual Members of Parliament representing constituents, we may not always agree with the decisions that come out of the process, but there is no doubt that those responsible for the decisions work hard on behalf of our constituents and the Foreign Office.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of additional posts—in India, in particular. We keep our posts under review, and we review also their ability to provide an adequate and efficient visa service. We are moving towards much more efficient and effective levels of service. If time allowed me, I could quote the figures from Bombay, which show that there is no waiting time, for instance, for an interview for a visitor's visa application—a significant improvement. I promise that the Government will keep under review at all times the provision of posts in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. If we feel that there is a gap in the service, we will make sure—if we can—that it is filled.

Finally, I recognise the points that my hon. Friend makes about the importance of the visa regime, its governing policy and its procedure application. The ability to come to the United Kingdom is, for very many people, an important and natural element of family life, and we should support it. I hope that our procedures make it possible for more and more families to be united. It is Government policy to support the family, and our immigration policies—and our procedures for implementing those policies—should work exactly in that direction.

George Atkinson

1.30 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I first raised the matter of the detention in Dubai of my constituent, Mr. George Atkinson, in an Adjournment debate on 2 June 1998. Prior to that and subsequently, I have raised the case in a number of parliamentary questions and also outside the House.

Some colleagues have cautioned me to take care not to damage our relations with Dubai. I share their concern. The United Kingdom benefits from excellent relations with Dubai. Our business men prosper in Dubai because of the competitiveness of their products, their expertise and their professionalism, as well as the professionalism of the business people of Dubai. The relationship is of great mutual benefit. The growing trust between our two peoples is encouraged and nurtured by the lasting friendship of the Maktoum family. The friendship is mutual—we have a great affection for them.

It is not my purpose to criticise the Government of Dubai. I hold no such brief. I was elected to hold to account the Government of the United Kingdom. In making my criticism, I do not demur from the views that I expressed on 2 June last year, in which I made clear my appreciation for the assistance that I had received from Ministers and from the Foreign Office.

Indeed, I go further. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett) has been extremely generous with his time, as has his ministerial colleague, Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean. Their staff have been assiduous in dealing with the issues and questions that I have raised.

In August this year, I met our consul-general, Mr. Nicholas Armour. I found his advice of great value. I take this opportunity to put on the record once again my gratitude and appreciation to Mr. Armour and his staff, and to Ministers and the staff of the Foreign Office.

In all my dealings on the case of Mr. Atkinson, it has been my purpose to secure contact at ministerial level between the United Kingdom and the Government of Dubai. In that, I perceive that I have failed. That is in stark contrast to the statement made by the Foreign Secretary to the House on Monday afternoon, when he referred to the five British nationals currently detained in Yemen. He said:

> "On Saturday, I stressed to the Prime Minister that if the five men are to be charged, those charges must be brought soon. They and their relatives are entitled to know why they have been arrested, and the five men cannot defend themselves against allegations until they are charged. If they are not to be charged, they must be released."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 21.]

Quite. Surely the relatives of those detainees have every right to expect such a robust defence from their Foreign Secretary. However, that contrasts rather sharply with the case of my constituent, Mr. George Atkinson, who was imprisoned for some 13 months before formal, clear, understandable charges were brought against him. I make no criticism of the Government of Dubai for that. It was a complex and difficult investigation. Nevertheless, the question of bail should have arisen at a ministerial level—indeed, I invited Ministers to take it up.

It was only when Mrs. Atkinson—Mr. George Atkinson's wife and my constituent—secured the intervention of the United Nations working group on

[Mr. Desmond Swayne]

arbitrary detention that a formal note was sent from the Foreign Office to the Government of Dubai relating to the fact that Mr. Atkinson had been denied bail, despite the court in Dubai ordering that he be released on bail. I hope that, after the relaunch of the Government on Monday, we can expect a more robust approach from Ministers in the future.

I shall deal now with events in Dubai. In mid-December my constituent, Mr. George Atkinson, was found guilty by a court in Dubai on charges that amount to the defrauding of the Government of Dubai. As a consequence a substantial fine was imposed on him and he is to be imprisoned for five years. Nevertheless, I persist in my belief in Mr. Atkinson's innocence. I do so on two grounds.

First, Mr. Atkinson was convicted largely on the testimony of one Steven Trutch, a former employee of Al Naboodah Laing. I have seen affidavits also sworn by Mr. Trutch that were not brought to the attention of the court in Dubai, which flatly contradict the version of events given by Mr. Trutch's affidavit submitted to the court in Dubai. I therefore believe that Mr. Trutch is not a credible witness—so much so that I sought advice from Law Officers whether the crime of perjury had been committed, given that some of the affidavits were sworn in our jurisdiction.

Of course, no charge of perjury can be brought unless we can first establish which of the three different versions of events is the true one. I do not believe that the appeal court in Dubai will be of any assistance in the matter. I believe that the appeal court will deal with the question not whether Mr. Trutch is a reliable witness, but whether he is a witness at all. I believe that the lower court in Dubai erred in accepting testimony in the form of an affidavit by Mr. Trutch, when the law in Dubai clearly requires that evidence be given in person. I am confident that the appeal court in Dubai will quash the conviction of Mr. Atkinson.

My second ground for persisting in my belief in Mr. Atkinson's innocence is the fact that he negotiated with the Government of Dubai in 1994 a waiver of all claims against him. As a consequence of his part of that agreement, he handed over substantial assets. The lower court decided that that agreement applied not to all claims, but only to civil claims against Mr. Atkinson. I believe that that is mistaken.

I have a statement signed on 5 January by a Mr. Giles Dixon, who is a solicitor. At the time of the negotiation of the agreement in 1994, he acted for Mr. Atkinson as a partner in the London firm, Turner Kenneth Brown. It is a lengthy statement, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and with your permission I shall quote only briefly from it. Mr. Dixon states:

> "Clause 7(1) of the Agreement . . . does not distinguish between civil and criminal claims. The Government agreed to waive and release 'all claims' which they had against Mr. Atkinson and his colleagues. The Agreement was drafted by lawyers for the Government and had they intended to confine the waiver and release to civil claims, the Agreement would have said so. During the negotiations, we requested a waiver of civil and criminal claims but earlier draft Agreements had referred only to civil claims. The Agreement of 17th January 1994 did not do so: it waived 'all' claims."

I believe that when this powerful evidence is presented at the court of appeal in Dubai, it will be a telling argument. I am confident that Mr. Atkinson's conviction will be quashed.

On 2 June 1998 the Minister pointed out that Dubai has a sophisticated legal system. I agree with him. It is a system that shares many principles with our legal system. In addition, it encompasses principles from the Sharia law and the Napoleonic code. I have been mightily impressed by the speed with which Mr. Atkinson's appeal has been organised. As a visitor over some years at Her Majesty's prisons Wandsworth and Wormwood Scrubs, I know many prisoners who would have counted themselves fortunate had their appeals been organised so swiftly in this country. I am confident that the legal system in Dubai will show its strengths and that my constituent, Mr. Atkinson, will be released so that the House need not return to this subject again.

1.41 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on yet again raising the issue of George Atkinson and his family. I appreciate the keen interest that the hon. Gentleman has taken in this case. I take the opportunity of thanking the hon. Gentleman for his warm personal words both to me and to my noble Friend Baroness Symons, and also to the respective staff of our two private offices. I shall ensure that the hon. Gentleman's words are conveyed to the staff of these offices. They will much appreciate them. It is a reassuring moment for them to be thanked by Members. Too often, the messengers are shot down rather than those who have taken the policy decision. I am sure that the staff will appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Having created that broad element of consensus, I may at some stage suggest that in the hon. Gentleman's speech there was perhaps a profound element of misunderstanding about the powers and role of the United Kingdom Government and the Foreign Office. Before I break the warm consensus that flows from the hon. Gentleman's speech, however, it may be useful if I set out some of the up-to-date background to the case and some of the action that has been taken on behalf of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, Mr. Atkinson.

The House will be interested to know, as the hon. Gentleman said, that we last debated this issue on 2 June 1998. We have subsequently had the opportunity of bringing the House up to date as a result of questions asked mostly, if not entirely, by the hon. Gentleman.

Since our debate on 2 June, Mr. Atkinson's trial has been concluded. He was found guilty and sentenced on 13 December to a total of six years' imprisonment. An appeal was heard on 10 January and the hon. Gentleman's comments about the speed of that appeal will, I have no doubt, be noted in appropriate places. I am sure that there will be warm approbation for his comments about the sophisticated nature of the Dubai legal system and for the way in which it moved quickly from first hearing to appeal. We understand that a decision on that appeal will be announced at about the end of next month—it is suggested, on 28 February. In some respects, the case therefore remains sub judice, as it is part of the legal process in Dubai.

It may be worth while saying to the hon. Gentleman that there is an apparent misunderstanding of the Foreign Office's role in terms of the eloquent contribution that

he made in opening the debate. I had the impression on occasions that he was pleading his constituent's case. I see nothing wrong in that. Indeed, I thought that he was arguing his case with great skill and eloquence. I am sure that if I ever need the services of a constituency Member or a lawyer who can put forward a case, I shall be tempted, as a result of the professional and efficient way in which the hon. Gentleman advanced his argument, to approach him. However, it is not the role and responsibility of the Foreign Office to act as lawyers in court. We do not have that role; nor do we have that expertise. Nor can we be expected to provide that sort of service to every Briton who is arrested and charged overseas.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not expect us to provide such a service. The demand on our time and resources would be enormous. We must ensure, however, that there is a fair trial under the legal system that exists. We must try to inject our standards of fairness as far as we can. Those are the procedural points about due process. We must ensure that we have access to the United Kingdom citizen, that we assist that citizen in whatever way possible and that we make it possible for that citizen to have access to lawyers who can represent him or her during the legal process. Those are our procedural responsibilities.

We do not have the substantive responsibility of representing individual British citizens. If the hon. Gentleman thinks about it, that would be an invidious position in which to be cast. Some British citizens overseas will be innocent of the charges laid against them. Others, sadly, will be guilty. The fact that someone is British does not necessarily mean that inevitably and intrinsically he is innocent of the charges laid against him. It is not our responsibility to prove guilt or innocence in certain circumstances. However, it is our responsibility to ensure that due process takes place and that the British citizen involved gains proper access to the consular services that the Foreign Office offers. We have tried to do that in George Atkinson's case.

I realise that the hon. Gentleman, in 12 minutes of consensual debate, could not resist one moment of lowering his standards and having a side-swipe at my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. I understand that. It seems to be an irresistible temptation. Let me offer the hon. Gentleman a word of advice: it does not seem to be doing the shadow Foreign Secretary much good. Every time the right hon. and learned Gentleman succumbs to that temptation, it seems to damage his career even more. The hon. Gentleman has a longer career ahead of him than the right hon. and learned Gentleman and I advise him to maintain the more consensual approach, when he was doing much better.

All that my right hon. Friend was saying in his statement on Monday in the context of Yemen—as he would say in the context of any other similar case—was that it is the responsibility of the British Government, through the Foreign Office, to ensure that there is consular access, that there are consular services and that, as far as possible, due process is followed. With respect to the hon. Gentleman, what has happened in Yemen and what will happen in other cases is on all fours with what has happened in the case of George Atkinson. In every case we shall try to ensure due process and access for the British Foreign Office and our consular and embassy staff.

Our staff have been active in their contacts with Mr. Atkinson. I think that the hon. Gentleman—not on this occasion but in the Adjournment debate on 2 June 1998—made it clear that he was satisfied with the support given by the consular staff. He is right in saying that. That activity has gone on from the very first day. It has been our consular staff's responsibility to do what they can through this process to support Mr. Atkinson and his family. It is fair to say that the staff have carried out that responsibility with great skill, patience and sensitivity. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they will continue to carry out that responsibility for however long it is necessary to do so. I hope that I can join the hon. Gentleman in expressing my thanks to the consular staff in Dubai for the work that they have done and will continue to do.

The hon. Gentleman said that there was a ministerial responsibility to raise the case with the Dubai authorities and that Ministers should have intervened. Again, I think that there is an element of misunderstanding in that statement. What the hon. Gentleman so temptingly and tantalisingly offered to Ministers was almost that we should take on the role of advocacy on behalf of his constituent. We cannot perform that role. Certainly, we can ask that due procedure take place, and the hon. Gentleman knows that my noble Friend Baroness Symons called in the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to make a number of points about the George Atkinson case to ensure that due process was followed. She emphasised that, if necessary, he should be charged and that, if not, he should be freed. She also made it clear that there should be access to lawyers and legal advice.

That action took place at ministerial level, so the hon. Gentleman has no valid grounds for criticism of the Foreign Office. We cannot go to Dubai and initiate a substantive argument about the case, Minister to Minister and Government to Government. That is not our task, which is to ensure that due process works, and we have delivered that message to the United Arab Emirates ambassador. In that way, we have discharged our ministerial responsibilities, as I hope the hon. Gentleman will accept.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the long period during which George Atkinson was held without charge. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have said recently in the context of Yemen, our principle is always that people should be either charged or released. That is the basis of United Kingdom law, and it is an essential freedom and human right.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the United Nations working group on arbitrary detention, one of the 21 thematic mechanisms set up by the UN Commission on Human Rights. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the working group came to a specific view on the George Atkinson case, but I remind the House that the group's decisions are not legally binding on Governments. However, we took immediate action, as we believe that it is the responsibility of any Government to accept the working group's advice, decisions and guidance. On 10 November last year, our consul-general, in a note to the Government in Dubai, stated that the embassy

"with reference to the opinion adopted on 17 September 1998 by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that the deprivation of liberty of George Atkinson is arbitrary, has the honour to request of the Government of Dubai the release of Mr. George Atkinson from detention."

[Mr. Derek Fatchett]

The hon. Gentleman can therefore be reassured that the Government, acting on the opportunity provided by the UN working group judgment, asked the authorities in Dubai to release George Atkinson. It may sound harsh, but what we were really saying was that George Atkinson either had to be charged or released. We hoped that he would be released, which would have been consistent with the working group judgment, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we made those representations on behalf of his constituent. We shall continue to make those representations whenever it is necessary or possible.

From what I have said, the House will understand that the Foreign Office has been active, persistent and committed in carrying out its responsibilities through our consular services. We have provided advice and support for Mr. Atkinson and we have taken up his case with the Dubai authorities. We shall continue to take an interest in his case and to ensure that all procedures are followed. We are not the Government of Dubai and we can only discharge our own responsibilities. We do not have the power to enforce, only the power of influence, argument and representation.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the authorities in Dubai and the Government of the United Arab Emirates are friends of the United Kingdom and we have a close relationship with them. Indeed, it was the previous Conservative Government who signed a detailed defence arrangement with the United Arab Emirates, an arrangement which is unique for a country outside NATO. That shows clearly that a close relationship exists between our two countries. In the context of that friendship, it is right, if we feel that one of our citizens is not being treated according to due process, that we should draw the matter to the attention of the host Government. We have done that, and we shall continue to do so whenever the case of George Atkinson requires it.

To sum up, the Government have discharged our responsibilities and will continue to do so. We can act only on the procedural points, not on the substantive points. We cannot make a judgment on the facts, or bring in a verdict. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman—and, through him, George Atkinson and his family—that the Foreign Office will continue to provide the services that Parliament asks us to provide, with all the commitment and resources that we have.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

Alliance and Leicester plc (Group Reorganisation) Bill *[Lords]*

Read a Second time, and committed.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister was asked—

Anti-drugs Strategy

1. **Mr. Eric Martlew** (Carlisle): If he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [63718]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): The strategy was launched in April last year. In September, we announced that more than £200 million would be added to Government spending in support of the strategy in the next three years. In December, we published a new public service agreement, setting four key performance targets for the strategy. Drug action teams throughout the country have now submitted their local action plans for 1999–2000. The United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator will produce his first annual report and a national plan in the spring.

Mr. Martlew: I welcome that answer from my right hon. Friend. In Cumbria, the new money from that initiative and the health action zone will mean five new people in post to fight the drugs threat in that rural county. I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees that we have problems with drug abuse in rural as well as in urban areas. Will he express a view on the recent reports about the increasing use of drugs, especially heroin, by children?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support for the work that we are doing, in particular in Cumbria, which he and I represent in the House. We remain concerned about the reports, and evidence, of the increase in the use of heroin, in particular among children. All our strategic efforts are focused on reducing those problems. The Department for Education and Employment issued guidance on the effective delivery of drug education in schools and youth services and on dealing with drug-related incidents. The police give high priority to stifling the availability of drugs, in particular heroin. Research suggests that local responses are often the most effective and at least £57 million will be invested to develop better prevention approaches in the next three years, including a new national organisation, the drug prevention advisory service, which the Home Office will launch in the spring to support the development of drug action teams and local prevention strategies.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate what is being done, but does legislation need to be changed to advance the campaign against drug dealing and trafficking? A report in one of the Belfast newspapers a year ago suggested that the police needed a change in the law. Is the tardiness in dealing with some problems due to the fact that the law needs to be sharpened?

Dr. Cunningham: We would always be willing to consider changes in the law if evidence showed that they were necessary to make our fight against drugs more effective. If the hon. Gentleman refers that matter to me, I will be happy to consider it and to have my colleagues in Government consider it.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will my right hon. Friend do two things? Will he ensure that the co-ordination of drugs strategy pinpoints students about to go to university, who are a vulnerable group and could be targeted with some ease? Also, will he caution all those involved in the valiant struggle against drugs to stop boasting when there is a haul? When I was a Front-Bench spokesman involved in that problem, I was told by senior people in the police force that every haul represented only 1 per cent. of the drugs available. That is a sign of how much is coming into the country, so please will my right hon. Friend ensure that those involved exercise caution when boasting about drugs hauls?

Dr. Cunningham: My hon. Friend is right to say that we should focus on the threat of drugs to young people, children in school as well as students, because drugs wreck lives, families and careers. On announcements about the success of the police or Customs and Excise activities in stopping drugs coming into the country in the first place, if law enforcement agencies have successes, they are entitled to tell us about them and I believe that the public want to know about them. I do not think that anyone is boasting too much.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the right hon. Gentleman regard it as a matter of principle that any Minister engaged in the forefront of the campaign against drugs should also be a non-smoker?

Dr. Cunningham: No.

Better Government Initiative

2. **Barbara Follett** (Stevenage): If he will make a statement on the progress of the better government initiative, with specific reference to women. [63719]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): As my right hon. Friend explained to the House on 21 October last year, the Government will publish a White Paper in the spring setting out our programme to modernise government. He chairs a Cabinet Committee that is driving forward this agenda. The White Paper will mean better government for all, as we work to improve the services that matter to those, women and men, who use them.

The Government's recent report, "Delivering for Women: Progress so far", set out the many achievements that we have already made for women, including our work on the national child care strategy, the working families tax credit and money to improve breast cancer treatment. We recently issued revised guidance to the civil service to ensure that the needs and concerns of women are taken fully into account at all stages of the development of policy and the design of services.

Barbara Follett: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Given the continued under-representation of women at all levels of Government, will he take measures to ensure that the forthcoming White Paper makes provision to correct that democratic deficit?

Mr. Kilfoyle: That question is entirely consistent with my hon. Friend's sustained and committed support for the

cause of women. I assure her that, with the changes that have been made in the Cabinet Office, in terms not only of its designation but of the reallocation of the women's unit to it, and my right hon. Friend's responsibility for mainstreaming equal opportunities across Government, I can guarantee that the rights, needs and potential of women are taken fully into account in the White Paper.

Policy Co-ordination

3. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What recent representations he has received about the mechanisms for the co-ordination of Government policy. [63720]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): Since the appointment of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) have raised issues relating to the mechanisms for the co-ordination of Government policy.

Mr. Amess: Will the hon. Gentleman give some details on precisely what are the mechanisms for co-ordinating Government policy? Are they press officers or Ministers of the Crown who have resigned because they have done nothing wrong, or does this refer to his right hon. Friend, who I believe was entrusted with the policy? If he alone is responsible, does the Minister agree that he is not having too grand a time?

Mr. Kilfoyle: My right hon. Friend is having a splendid time advocating the Government's cause from his position in the Cabinet Office. The redesignation of the Cabinet Office was designed to ensure the coherence across Government that the previous Government aspired to but failed miserably to achieve, given their fissiparous tendencies. We have put on record several times, in the House and elsewhere, that the presentation of Government policy is vital to this Government, as it should have been to the previous one. We are committed to ensuring that we co-ordinate effectively the delivery of our 177 manifesto commitments. To that end, the Prime Minister established a Committee, which my right hon. Friend chairs, to drive through the new agenda for the Cabinet Office.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): In order to ensure that the Government are in a position to implement their undertakings to allow the country to decide about the single currency and the reform of the electoral system to the House, will the Minister say that the Government support the introduction of generic referendums legislation to ensure that there is fairness in the conduct of such referendums and also to ensure that they can be introduced at the appropriate moment?

Mr. Kilfoyle: The answer is no, I will not support generic referendums on behalf of the Government.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): On the question of responsibility for co-ordination, we were all pleased to read, in the profile of the Minister for the Cabinet Office in *The House Magazine* this week, that he liked his "trouble-shooting role". Is that not just as well if the year proceeds for the Government as it has begun? When will he begin? Will he begin with his Cabinet colleagues, whom he accused on Monday of not being part of the team; will he begin with the Deputy Prime Minister, who has threatened to resign if the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) rejoins the Administration; or will he begin with the many members of the Government who made it clear over the new year that they are fed up with the Government's obsession with spin and want to focus on substance? Or are the divisions in the Government such that even the right hon. Gentleman's well-known conciliation skills are not up to the task?

Mr. Kilfoyle: It ill-behoves me to give the right hon. Gentleman advice, but one thing that he should have learnt in his long tenure of office in the previous Government is never to believe everything that is written in the newspapers, and certainly not to misrepresent my right hon. Friend's position in those matters. The new Cabinet Office and the roles defined therein will continue to lead the drive for coherence across Government, to present the Government's case well and to ensure that in both policy formulation and the delivery of services we think strategically and deliver in a joined-up fashion.

Anti-drugs Strategy

4. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): What initiatives have been taken by Mr. Keith Hellawell to involve parents in the national anti-drugs strategy. [63721]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): Many parents were consulted by the UK anti-drugs co-ordinator and his deputy before the Government's anti-drugs strategy was published in April 1998, including some with experience of problems in their families. The strategy includes the provision of information, advice and support to parents. Drug action teams across the country have been asked to include, in their local action plans, action to consult and involve parents and carers of vulnerable young people in relation to drugs education and prevention programmes. The national picture will be reported in the spring.

Mrs. Winterton: Is the Minister aware that some clubbing magazines, which can be bought anywhere, are positively undermining parents, teachers and the Government's anti-drugs message by articles virtually promoting illegal drug use to the young? Will he ask the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator to tackle the problem as a matter of urgency, and to advise companies, such as British Telecom, that it is utterly irresponsible to advertise in publications that encourage people to break the law?

Dr. Cunningham: The hon. Lady raises an important point with which I wholeheartedly agree. I deplore the promotion, or the glamorisation, of drug taking, from wherever it may emanate. It is an insidious and evil message to give to young people in particular. I can assure her that I have already raised the issue on one occasion with my officials, but, as she has raised this important issue again in the House, I shall ensure that I raise it with them again.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): Customs and Excise officers at Birmingham international airport have been put on alert because of the danger of a new

drug coming in from the United States on the daily flights from New York and Chicago, which is commonly referred to as Nazi crank, or the poor man's heroin. Can the Minister confirm that, within the drugs policy, we shall continue to co-ordinate with Customs and Excise, but also to alert parents and teenagers that, whatever the drugs are called, they are deeply dangerous and should not be trivialised?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I shall do as my hon. Friend requests, simply because what she says is excellent advice to parents and children everywhere.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of my long-standing interest, as a barrister who has prosecuted and defended drugs cases for a number of years, in tackling the drugs problem. Will he join me in paying tribute to the work done in Surrey by Dr. Tony Blowers and the Surrey drugs action team in helping to pilot many projects which I know are now being looked at by the drugs tsar, Mr. Hellawell? Will the right hon. Gentleman say that it is important to use best practice from countries such as Surrey, which have a long track record of tackling the drugs problem effectively?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I will join the hon. Gentleman in complimenting and congratulating the drugs action teams in Surrey and elsewhere which are promoting best practice. We now have a template for drugs action teams across the country. We are examining their performance exactly so that we can take the good examples such as those referred to by the hon. Gentleman and promote them across the country.

Biotechnology

5. **Mr. David Drew** (Stroud): If he will make a statement on the co-ordination of Government policy on biotechnology. [63722]

13. **Jane Griffiths** (Reading, East): If he will make a statement on the co-ordination of Government policy on biotechnology. [63732]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): The Prime Minister announced in October the establishment of the ministerial group on biotechnology and genetic modification and asked me to chair this group, on which all Departments with an interest are represented. The group is reviewing our policies on biotechnology.

Mr. Drew: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I know that he is aware of the amount of public concern on a whole range of issues from genetic modification through to xenotransplantation. May I urge my right hon. Friend to communicate as much information as possible to the public so that they can make up their minds on the basis of the facts rather than on innuendo?

Dr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The formation of the new ministerial group reinforces our already robust arrangements for overseeing developments in biotechnology. Many of those arrangements were put in place, quite rightly, by the previous Administration. We are keen to ensure that our safeguards and mechanisms for oversight keep pace with the rapid developments in biotechnology without stifling the huge potential for biotechnology to benefit society, whether in health care, agriculture, food or environmental protection. As my hon. Friend said, it is essential to carry the confidence of the public in those developments and to be completely open with the public about the nature of them.

Jane Griffiths: I, too, welcomed my right hon. Friend's announcement before Christmas of a review of the regulatory framework for genetic modification and biotechnology. Does he agree that the best way to alleviate public concern is to maintain and achieve transparency in all those matters? Will he assure the House that that will be achieved?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that she requests. We are determined to ensure transparency. We are determined to allow people to express their views on those developments. One of the purposes of the review is to see whether it is necessary to create any new organisations to enable people to participate more effectively in the development of our policies.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister recognise that the policy for the approval of genetically modified foods is incoherent both within Departments in Britain and within the European Union? Does he accept that, if consumers need information, businesses equally need the assurance that the processes will be rapid, effective and transparent so that we do not miss the opportunity of major investment in Britain by being left behind on a modern and important new technology? Will the right hon. Gentleman knock heads together in Britain and Brussels?

Dr. Cunningham: No, I do not agree with that. I do not believe that that policy is incoherent. If the right hon. Gentleman had been listening carefully a moment ago, he would have heard me pay tribute to some of the work done by his Government in putting in place some effective controls. The purpose of the review is to check that there is no gap in our existing regulations.

I agree with the second part of the right hon. Gentleman's question about needing to ensure that we do not stifle legitimate and effective opportunities for commercial exploitation. I had already said that in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) a few moments ago.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Will the right hon. Gentleman co-ordinate not only clarity of thinking in United Kingdom policy but diplomatic efforts to provide support for those countries such as Austria and Luxembourg which have taken the entirely rational decision to say that genetically modified organisms should not be released in their territory for the time being?

Dr. Cunningham: No, and I believe that those two countries are in breach of their EU obligations. The United Kingdom has taken the lead in Europe in pushing for improved, more effective legislation on GMOs and in promoting more wide-ranging risk assessments and more discussion of the legitimate ethical concerns. The way forward in Europe could not and should not be unilateral action in defiance of EU decisions.

Better Government Initiative (Older People)

7. **Mr. Ernie Ross** (Dundee, West): If he will make a statement on the better government for older people initiative. [63724]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): The better government for older people initiative is a new and significant part of our programme to modernise government. Twenty-eight local authorities, working with a Cabinet Office-led team, are developing an ambitious range of projects to improve the quality of public services for older people. I can inform the House today that we are setting up a learning network to encourage many more authorities across the United Kingdom to prepare services for an aging population and to share learning and best practice.

In addition, this morning my hon Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I announced £120 million of new funding for 33 projects promoting greater responsiveness and efficiency in the delivery of public service. One example is the integrated services for pensioners, run by the Benefits Agency, to try out new ways of integrating the services that they provide to pensioners with those provided by local authorities and others. The funding is being provided from the invest to save budget set up by the Treasury following the comprehensive spending review.

The projects that we announced today are practical examples of what we mean by modernising public services. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend asked for a statement and I am making a statement. They demonstrate—

Madam Speaker: Order. Responses are becoming far too long. I have Back Benchers to consider. Let us have an end to this answer.

Mr. Ross: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. I welcome the statement that he made with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary this morning on the invest to save projects. Can he assure the House that elderly people will be involved in the projects from the outset? Will the projects deliver quality effective services for the elderly? Can my right hon. Friend tell me whether any of the projects will be in Scotland?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I can. The Scottish Office is introducing an integration of planning and delivery of health and social services for community care clients in Scotland. Two other projects will be devoted to improving services for elderly people. Of course we shall consult elderly people and organisations about the projects.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): When Labour was in opposition, it used regularly to promise that a Labour Government would reform the arrangements for payment for long-term care to reduce the need for elderly people to sell their home in order to pay for such care. Since the Government took office, we have the establishment of a royal commission and nothing else. When will we hear about the Government's proposals to discharge the pledge that the Labour party gave to the electorate before the general election?

Dr. Cunningham: That question comes ill from the right hon. Gentleman, who in many years in government took only actions that made the problem worse. One of the purposes of establishing the royal commission is exactly to examine in detail the problems and see how best we can introduce policies to resolve them.

Duchy of Lancaster

8. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): If he will make a statement on his duties in relation to the Duchy of Lancaster. [63725]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): As Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, I administer the Duchy on behalf of Her Majesty the Queen. My responsibilities include the administration of the Duchy's estates and finances, the appointment of magistrates in the Duchy area, appointments to Church livings and several appointments in connection with the Duchy's historic duties.

Mr. Pike: As my right hon. Friend is aware, one of his duties is the administration of the Duchy benevolent fund, and his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) introduced new methods to improve the way in which that money was dealt with in Lancashire—the County Palatine. Has his Department been able to monitor how effectively the new methods are working, and is there a surplus in the fund, for which worthy causes in Burnley could now make a bid?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I can confirm that we will monitor how the fund works and I shall write to my hon. Friend about that matter. As for the people of Burnley benefiting from the fund, I can inform the House that anyone living and operating in the Duchy of Lancaster territories can benefit from the benevolent fund, if their applications are approved.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): As the whole House is aware of what a wonderful Department the right hon. Gentleman runs and how efficient he is, can he explain how his officials have got so tied up in red tape that they can deliver only three new regulatory initiatives to the Deregulation Committee for the next six months? If our law is so perfect and does not need improvement, will he examine European directives?

Dr. Cunningham: I am not sure what that question has to do with my responsibilities as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, but, as I have already told the hon. Gentleman, we are considering that matter and I hope that we shall introduce some more proposals before too long.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Does my right hon. Friend look forward to celebrating the 600th anniversary of the Duchy of Lancaster this year in the glorious city of Lancaster and, at the same time, welcoming the full fruits of the comprehensive spending review, the national minimum wage, the minimum pension guarantee and all the excellent things that a radical, reforming Labour Government have introduced?

Dr. Cunningham: The answer to that question is yes.

Electoral Reform

10. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement about the Cabinet Office's co-ordination of the Government's constitutional reforms in respect of changing the system of electing hon. Members. [63727]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): The Cabinet Office's role is to ensure that proper collective consideration takes place and that the Government's business is conducted in a timely and efficient way.

Sir Sydney Chapman: There has been a deafening silence since the publication of the Jenkins report, save for general opprobrium during the debate in the Chamber. Can the hon. Gentleman confirm, on behalf of the Government, that there will not be a referendum on that issue in the lifetime of this Parliament?

Mr. Kilfoyle: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Jenkins commission said that the matter was extremely complex and that, whatever changes might be anticipated, they could not be introduced before the next election. The Home Secretary stated that there should be a wide and open debate on any proposals, and that debate is now under way.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The hon. Gentleman cannot get away with that answer, in view of what was in the Labour manifesto. Will he explain how the Government define the difference between a pledge, a promise and a commitment?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I prefer to say that we said in the manifesto that we would set up a commission. We did that, and it has reported. I should add that, of our 177 manifesto commitments, 172 have already been implemented or are already under way.

Press Officers and Spokesman

11. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): What representations he has received regarding the role of Government press officers and spokesmen. [63729]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): I have been asked a number of questions by hon. Members. The Government responded on 11 January to the Select Committee on Public Administration's report about the Government information and communications service. The Committee was due to consider the report at a meeting yesterday and will decide when it should be published. Naturally, that is a matter for the Committee.

Mr. Ruffley: Why will not the Minister investigate the serious allegation that Mr. Charlie Whelan could not discharge his functions as a Government press spokesman because he had been bought by the former Paymaster General, and that the former Paymaster General had paid his wages when the Labour party was in opposition?

Mr. Kilfoyle: That is a bit rich, coming as it does from a Conservative Member who spent most of the 1990s acting as special adviser to that thoroughly discredited Government. It is has been stated clearly that Mr. Whelan intends to retire from his position—[HON. MEMBERS: "When?] He has done the honourable thing on grounds that were never recognised by the Conservative party: that, once the purveyors of the message become more important than the Government of the day's policies, it is time for them to go. We have learnt that lesson; the Conservatives never did.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [63748] **Mr. Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 13 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

I am delighted to inform the House also that, earlier today, John Brooke was released following his five-day ordeal at the hands of his Yemeni kidnappers. We understand that he is safe and well, and will return to the country tomorrow morning.

Mr. Dobbin: This is the first question to the Prime Minister in the final year of this millennium, so I feel rather politically important at this point in time. On behalf of fellow Back Benchers, I wish the people of my constituency and the country a happy and prosperous end to this historic period.

More specifically, has my right hon. Friend seen the unemployment figures announced today? I note that in my region, more and more people are getting back to work, and in my constituency more than 200 new jobs have been created. Will my right hon. Friend give his continued support to the creation of even more highly skilled and well paid jobs, and, unlike the previous Government, introduce the additional protection of a national minimum wage?

The Prime Minister: I trust that Opposition Members will welcome today's fall in the unemployment figures. It is worth pointing out that, even facing an economic downturn, under this Government interest rates are coming down, we have £40 billion of new investment in schools and hospitals from April, 50,000 youngsters have found jobs under the new deal, and youth unemployment is at its lowest level since the mid-1970s. That is the difference between the policies for stability under this Government, and boom and bust under the Conservatives.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Does the Prime Minister now regret that the Health Secretary said, just two months ago, that the national health service can look forward to the winter with confidence?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the money that we have put in—money opposed by the previous Government—we have managed to get through this winter in far better shape than we otherwise would.

Mr. Hague: There was no answer to the question there. In the past few weeks, we have seen intensive care bed

availability at its lowest ever level, doctors and nurses under even more pressure than before, pregnant women told not to give birth, refrigerated lorries used as temporary morgues, and people on trollies in hospitals. All those people were told they could look forward to the winter with confidence. Have not this Government's decisions made the NHS's winter difficulties worse than they should have been?

The Prime Minister: It is this Government who have put in £2.5 billion extra over the spending plans that we inherited from the Conservative Government. I visited one accident and emergency department last night, and I shall tell the House exactly what it said the problems were: a shortage of nurses; a lack of proper co-ordination between hospitals and social services; and a lack of long-term investment in the health service—all problems left to us by the Conservative Government, and all dealt with by the incoming Labour Government.

Mr. Hague: For the Prime Minister, there is always someone else to blame. The NHS is in crisis, and he says that the Government are innocent. Whatever happens in this Government, everybody always says that they are innocent. The Trade Secretary resigns, and he is innocent; the Paymaster General resigns—now we know why he was called the Paymaster General—and he is meant to be innocent; the Chancellor's press secretary resigns, or intends to resign, as we have just been informed, and he is innocent; the NHS is in crisis, and the Prime Minister is innocent. St. Tony, the angel of Islington, is always innocent.

The Government announced in November money that could have been announced in September. They cut the number of trainee nurses that we had announced and distorted clinical priorities by their targets. Why do not they take responsibility for something for a change?

The Prime Minister: It did not take the right hon. Gentleman long to try to get off the subject of the health service. His allegation that we have cut the number of nursing trainees is absolutely false. I will tell him why we have the problem with nursing shortages in the national health service today. The Tories cut by 4,000 the number of places between 1992 and 1994—while he was in government. There are 2,500 more trainee nurses today than there were when we came to office. Furthermore, if the Tories had matched our commitment to training, there would be 14,000 extra nurses on the wards.

It takes three years to train a nurse. We are putting in more resources, training more nurses and will see that nurses are properly rewarded and that there is recruitment and retention in the health service. In other words, we will deal with the appalling mess that we inherited from the Government of whom the right hon. Gentleman, who said nothing about the health service, was a member.

Mr. Hague: And of course the right hon. Gentleman says nothing about an increase in trainee nurses that would have been 14 per cent., but that this Government have achieved 11 per cent. The reason that they have not been able to handle matters this winter is that they have been too busy attacking each other. The Prime Minister has been too busy: first, trying to protect the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), and then trying to rehabilitate him. What is the Prime Minister doing treating the right hon. Gentleman as the come-back kid, when he is actually the kick-back kid? Why does he not recognise that?

Have not the past few weeks been a disgrace? Is it not time he buried the spin-doctoring politics of new Labour along with the self-serving, high-living career of the politician who invented it?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps we can return to the health service for a moment. The right hon. Gentleman made a specific allegation that it was our decision to cut planned new nurse training places by 3 per cent. I have looked into that allegation. That cut was actually made in January 1997, when his Government were still in office. In fact, far from cutting back, we achieved about 1,500 new nurses in training—more than were due that year.

Mr. Hague: What about some answers on the money announced in November that could have been announced in September, and the complete distortion of clinical priorities? While the NHS has been in crisis, personal feuds have taken the place—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. This House will come to order. Members will be heard—*[Interruption.]* Order.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister refuses to take responsibility for the Government's decisions. While the NHS has been in crisis, personal feuds have taken the place of political principle, personal loans have taken the place of political priorities. Does he not realise that, on that basis, no matter how often he relaunches the Government, a Government who believe in everything and in nothing cannot succeed?

The Prime Minister: One thing in which we do believe is the national health service. As a result of this Government's proposals, we have put in an extra £2.5 billion above the Conservative's published spending plans. We know what the Conservatives would have done, and we have exceeded it by £2.5 billion. From April, a further £21 billion is going into the NHS—what the right hon. Gentleman's shadow Chancellor calls "reckless and irresponsible spending". So the idea that the right hon. Gentleman is in a position to make any criticisms of the health service is absurd.

As for all the personal feuds, I will tell the House what would worry me about any Cabinet Minister, past or present. It would worry me if I ever caught any of them being filmed making train journeys across Spain.

Q2. [63749] **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): Will my right hon. Friend join me—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I cannot hear the hon. Lady, and she needs to be heard.

Ms Keeble: Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the staff of Northampton general hospital, which I visited on Monday? I saw the outstanding work that the hospital has done in caring for people—superb work that is undermined by remarks such as those that we have heard from the Leader of the Opposition. What I have said applies not just to the

accident and emergency department, but to wards throughout the hospital where staff have coped superbly with the influx of admissions resulting from the flu crisis.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the sterling work done by those and other NHS staff throughout the country who have dealt with—not created—a flu crisis underlines the need for a good pay settlement for nurses, enabling us to recruit and retain staff in an important profession?

The Prime Minister: The additional £21 billion that will be provided from April will ensure not just that we are better able to deal with the nursing shortages in the health service, but that we can make better capital investment in the service and provide better services for cancer patients and children, among others—so that, in other words, we are better able to fashion and run a health service for the 21st century. That is the commitment that this Government have made to the national health service.

We know the problems that hospitals face. We know the difficulties that they have had over the past few weeks. We know them, and acknowledge them. The great difference is that this Government are pledged and determined to do something about them.

Madam Speaker: Mr. Ashdown.

Hon. Members: Oh!

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): And a happy new year to you too.

Earlier today, the Prime Minister expressed the hope that his Government would be judged not on the basis of scandals, but on the basis of their record on crime, health and education. On which of these three would he like to be judged? Would he like to be judged on the basis of falling police numbers, longer NHS waiting times or the worst crisis in teacher recruitment for more than a decade?

The Prime Minister: There are problems in schools and hospitals; but let us analyse for a moment some of the problems that people no longer raise in the way that they used to. NHS waiting lists have fallen by more than 100,000 in the past few months. That does not mean that problems do not still exist in the health service, but we are tackling them.

There are 100,000 five, six and seven-year-olds who started school in September in classes of fewer than 30 who would otherwise not have done so, and there is a £2.5 billion investment programme for schools. Over the next two or three years, every school will be linked to the internet and given the computer equipment that it needs. Yes, teacher recruitment is a problem—which is why we are presenting proposals to transform teacher recruitment, teacher training, teacher performance and teachers' pay over the next few years.

The right hon. Gentleman asks on what we would like to be judged. We would like to be judged on the basis of the progress that we are making—and, at the next election, we shall have fulfilled each of our manifesto pledges.

Mr. Ashdown: But that is a promise. The truth is that the Government are travelling in the wrong direction. Does the Prime Minister dispute any of these three facts? There are now 780 fewer police officers than there were when he was elected; there are 10,000 vacancies for teachers in our schools; and there are 8,000 fewer nurses than the NHS needs. Does the Prime Minister not understand that the people did not vote to kick out the Tories in order to make public services worse?

Let me put this to the Prime Minister. If he were a Labour voter, lying on a trolley outside a ward that had been shut because the nurses could not be found to staff it, would he be more interested in what the Government had promised, or in why the Government had not delivered?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Sack him!

The Prime Minister: I do not think that we will put that one to the vote.

I think that the right hon. Gentleman will recognise, if he reflects and is reasonable about it—I am sure he will be—that, of course, there are still huge problems in the health service. We do not put right 20 years of neglect in schools and health in 20 months, but there are things happening in the health service. We have got rid of the Tory internal market which cost so much and did so much damage. We are introducing, for example, proper nursery education for four-year-olds. There are the extra kids in class sizes under 30. Waiting lists are coming down. Yes, we have to deal with waiting times too. We have to deal with nursing shortages, and we are. There are 2,500 more trainee nurses today than there were when we took office.

Therefore, I do not dispute that, to people who are facing difficulty today, it comes as cold comfort to be told that the Government are going to do it—but we are going to do it. [Hon. Members: "When?"] In our 20 months in office, we have done more already for the health service than that lot ever did, but we will do more. At the next election, people will see that the promises that we made on schools and health are exactly what we have delivered.

Ms Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the critical situation in Sierra Leone and I know that he will share the concerns of my constituents who have family and friends in that country. What steps are being taken by the Government; and what are the prospects for United Nations intervention to ensure that water and food are delivered to the beleaguered people of the capital city?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very serious issue. We are trying to do all we can to work with the UN agencies to bring humanitarian relief to people who are suffering from the rebel attacks on Freetown and, indeed, other towns in Sierra Leone. We are also in constant touch with the Nigerians because they are leading the ECOMOG forces that are trying to repel, along with the Ghanaians, those rebel forces.

Appalling atrocities have been carried out by the rebels and we are doing everything that we possibly can under the UN resolutions that have been passed to give assistance to the legitimate Government of Sierra Leone. It is important that we do all we can to support the democratic Government there.

Q3. [63750] **Mr. Nick Hawkins** (Surrey Heath): What does the Prime Minister say to the thousands of angry parents who, even if it was inconvenient to them,

and unlike him and many of his Cabinet cronies, followed the advice of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and ensured that their children were back for the first day of term? Is it not a case of "do as we say, not do as we do"?

The Prime Minister: I have explained the circumstances of that. I having nothing to add.

Madam Speaker: Order. We do not allow families to be used as battering rams across the Floor of the House.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Given my right hon. Friend's meeting with Mr. Mbeki last week in South Africa, does he not agree that South Africa's role is crucial in terms of wealth throughout Africa? Does he agree that the commitment to the full potential of wealth creation is important, if only to deal with matters such as crime reduction in almost all the regions of the continent of Africa?

The Prime Minister: One of the benefits of our new relationship with South Africa and of the recognition and support for the huge increase in overseas aid and development that has been introduced under this Government is that we are able to help countries such as South Africa to deal with their problems of crime and economic development, and to overcome the enormous problems caused by apartheid.

I am pleased to tell my right hon. Friend that I am confident about the future in South Africa, but I am particularly confident about our ability to play a constructive partnership role with South Africa in giving it and its people the best chance in the future.

Q4. [63751] **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones** (Ynys Môn): The Prime Minister will have seen the report this morning in the Welsh press that—*[Laughter.]* I am sure that he will have been briefed on it, anyway. The report stated that a significant section of the Labour party in Wales, disgusted by the drift towards Conservative values, is threatening to form a breakaway party. If those party members throw themselves overboard in such a manner, will the Prime Minister throw them a lifeline? Or does he accept their view that, although Wales needs devolution, his policy is to wed Wales to London?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that there was a point in there somewhere. The hon. Gentleman talks about Conservative values. I do not think that the new deal for the young unemployed in Wales is a Conservative value. I do not think that additional money for the health service in Wales is a Conservative value. I do not think that extra help for pensioners in Wales is a Conservative value. I also do not think that the help that we are giving in terms of regional development in Wales is a Conservative value. That is why I believe that people in Wales will vote Labour.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): As the Prime Minister is undoubtedly aware, the United Nations has designated 1999 as the year in which we can celebrate the contribution made by older people to our communities. Will he join me in congratulating the Salford project, which has brought together older people and young disaffected students in gardening projects, so that Salford realiy is beginning to bloom? Will he confirm that the Government—unlike Opposition Members, who seem determined to raise issues of tittle-tattle and gossip—will put the well-being of older people right at the heart of our policies? The important issues in the United Kingdom include the well-being of older people in our community and the contribution that they make.

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend will know, last June the Government established within government a group to ensure that we co-ordinate policies for elderly people. I congratulate her project in Salford on all the work that it is doing. The new deal for communities is putting hundreds of millions of pounds into the inner city, to help all people in the inner city—the young, the middle-aged and the elderly alike—to play their full contribution in society.

Q5. [63752] **Mr. Peter Atkinson** (Hexham): Is it true that the first that the Prime Minister knew of the loan from the former Paymaster General to the former Trade Secretary was on Thursday 16 December?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government remain 100 per cent. committed to introducing legislation on fairness at work at the earliest possible opportunity? Does he agree that the Government's fairness at work policy and our action on the national minimum wage, the working families tax credit and the new deal demonstrate that we have done more for all working people and for the trade union movement than any other British Government in very many years?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we remain completely committed to it. My hon. Friend has just described more Labour values—and very right they are, too. In particular, the minimum wage will for the first time give people in the United Kingdom the right not to be paid below a minimum amount. It will help literally hundreds of thousands of people in this country. The working families tax credit, which is opposed by the Conservatives—they would scrap it; they would take it away—means that low-income families will have to be earning at least £11,000 a year before they pay a penny in tax. That is a Labour Government working for the people of this country.

Q6. [63753] **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): Following the resignation of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, why will not the Prime Minister order the Cabinet Secretary to conduct a full inquiry into the financial disclosure of all Ministers and subsequently to publish the results in a proper register?

The Prime Minister: There are rules that have to be followed by all Ministers. Those rules apply to each and every one of them.

Q7. [63754] **Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield): While we are making good progress on delivering on our manifesto pledges on education, even given the demoralised state of the education sector that we took

over from that lot opposite, does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a further challenge to equip the British people with the skills, particularly information technology skills, that they desperately need to create jobs and wealth into the next century? Will he consider setting up a task force to bring together the many disparate but excellent schemes that exist to ensure that we become the information technology learning centre of the world?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend's suggestion is excellent, but we have got there already. We co-ordinate through a task force the bringing of computer literacy into schools and the training of teachers in it. Over the next few years, not only will all schools be wired up to the internet and kids get the chance to have the computer equipment, as I said earlier, but we shall be spending a large amount training teachers for it. That is in addition to the £55 million that was announced yesterday in support of the national numeracy strategy, around two thirds of which will support the training of teachers. That literacy and numeracy strategy is also opposed by the Tory party. The Conservatives are apparently even against children getting the basics right at 11.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): The Government have promised a 20 per cent. cut in emissions. So far, their legislation has increased emissions, both from domestic fuel consumption and by protecting coal against gas. What legislation does the Prime Minister intend to introduce to cut emissions to meet the promises that he has given the world?

The Prime Minister: A document will be published later this year on sustainable development and how we shall meet the targets that we have set out. We are also taking a series of measures that will help, not just in the European Union but here as well, not least of which are measures on energy conservation and public transport. Those are part of the reasons why the emissions are so great and why we have to tackle the issue. The right hon. Gentleman used to have responsibility for that, so he will know that, thanks to the work done by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, we have been in the lead on those issues not just in the European Union but throughout the world.

Q8. [63755] **Ms Gisela Stuart** (Birmingham, Edgbaston): The BBC studios at Pebble Mill are the second largest employer in my constituency. There is considerable disruption at the moment to do with the planned refurbishment of those studios. Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to remind the BBC that as a public service broadcaster it has a responsibility not just to the nation, but to the regions? That involves a commitment to regional production facilities in cities such as Birmingham.

The Prime Minister: I am all in favour of regional television and regional newspapers—more so on some days than others. My hon. Friend has made her point to the BBC. I hope that those at the BBC have listened. I share her sentiments.

Q9. [63756] **Sir Peter Tapsell** (Louth and Horncastle): Is the collapse at Beachy Head to be viewed as a symbolic warning to the nation of the right hon. Gentleman's apparently growing feebleness in defending Britain's European rebate and our general rights of veto within the European Union?

The Prime Minister: Our position on the rebate and the veto has not changed at all. The hon. Gentleman and I have a simple disagreement and we may as well be clear about it. He would like to see Britain out of the European Union. A large number of his hon. Friends agree with him. I am afraid that they are the predominant group in the Conservative party today.

I happen to believe that Britain's national interest is best served by being constructive in Europe. That way, we get more out of Europe. The best test of that is that after years in which the Conservatives were unable to get their own way on the lifting of the beef ban, this Government came in and, 18 months later, got it lifted. Conservative Members may disagree, but I believe that the vast majority of people in this country do not support the anti-Europeanism of the present-day Conservative party.

Speaker's Statement

3.30 pm

Madam Speaker: If the House will bear with me, I have a short statement to make. As a consequence of the decision that the House will meet at 11.30 am on Thursdays, deadlines for giving notice of business need to be changed. This relates to the time for submitting applications for private notice questions and for giving notice of presentation of public petitions. I have determined that, for the remainder of this Session, notices of private notice questions and the presentation of public petitions must be given by 10.30 on Thursday morning. Standing Order No. 24 applications also must be made by 10.30 am, as set out in the Sessional Orders that relate to Thursday morning sittings.

BILLS PRESENTED

Protection of Children

Ms Debra Shipley, supported by Ms Margaret Moran, Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours, Mr. David Curry, Mrs. Eleanor Laing, Judy Mallaber, Mr. Tony McNulty, Mr. Paul Tyler, Dr. Jenny Tonge, Ann Clwyd, Dr. Peter Brand and Ms Dari Taylor, presented a Bill to require a list to be kept of persons considered unsuitable to work with children; to extend the power to make regulations under section 218(6) of the Education Reform Act 1988; to make further provision with respect to that list and the list kept for the purposes of such regulations; to enable the protection afforded to children to be afforded to persons suffering from mental impairment; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed [Bill 12].

Fur Farming (Prohibition)

Maria Eagle, supported by Jackie Ballard, Mr. Ian Cawsey, Mr. Alan Clark, Mr. Robin Corbett, Mr. Roger Gale, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mr. Tim Loughton, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Mr. Kevin McNamara, Dr. Nick Palmer and Angela Smith, presented a Bill to prohibit the keeping of animals with a view to their slaughter solely or primarily for the commercial value of their fur; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March, and to be printed [Bill 13].

Mental Health (Amendment) (Scotland)

Mr. Eric Clarke, supported by Dr. Lewis Moonie, Mr. John McAllion, Mr. Brian H. Donohoe, Mrs. Maria Fyfe, Mr. Jimmy Hood, Mr. Jimmy Wray, Mr. John Swinney, Mr. Russell Brown, Mrs. Ray Michie, Mr. Malcolm Chisholm and Dr. Gavin Strang, presented a Bill to authorise hospital managers to continue to hold, expend and dispose of the property of persons to whom section 94(1) of the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 no longer applies: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March, and to be printed [Bill 14].

Referendums

Mr. Andrew Robathan, supported by Mr. Harry Barnes, Mr. Martin Bell, Mr. Frank Cook, Mr. Paul Flynn, Mr. Donald Gorrie, Mr. Dominic Grieve, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. Oliver Letwin, Mr. William Ross and Mr. Adrian Sanders, presented a Bill to make provision for the conduct of referendums and the establishment of a referendums commission: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March, and to be printed [Bill 15].

Right to Roam

Mr. Gordon Prentice, supported by Mr. Andrew F. Bennett, Mrs. Ann Cryer, Dr. David Clark, Helen Jones, Mr. David Taylor, Ms Joan Walley, Mr. David Lepper, Mrs. Diana Organ, Mr. Chris Mullin and Mrs. Betty Williams, presented a Bill to grant to the public a right to enter on foot and roam on open country in England and Wales for their recreation; to make certain financial and fiscal benefits dependent upon proper observance of the law relating to public footpaths; to ensure adequate publicity for access to relevant land; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 March, and to be printed [Bill 16].

Football (Offences and Disorder)

Mr. Simon Burns, supported by Mr. Patrick McLoughlin, Mr. Shaun Woodward, Mr. John Whittingdale, Mrs. Cheryl Gillan, Mr. Bernard Jenkin, Mr. Joe Ashton, Mr. Frank Field, Ms Ann Coffey, Mr. Jim Cunningham, Mr. Alan Keen and Mr. Peter L. Pike, presented a Bill to make further provision in relation to football-related offences; to make further provision for the purpose of preventing violence or disorder at or in connection with football matches; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 16 April, and to be printed [Bill 17].

Adoption (Intercountry Aspects)

Mr. Mark Oaten, supported by Mr. Keith Vaz, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Mr. Simon Hughes and Dr. Jenny Tonge, presented a Bill to make provision for giving effect to the Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, concluded at The Hague on 29th May 1993; to make further provision in relation to adoptions with an international element; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 23 April, and to be printed [Bill 18].

Licensing (Young Persons)

Ms Chris McCafferty, supported by Mr. Paul Truswell, Jane Griffiths, Mr. Brian Sedgemore, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Ann Clwyd, Mr. Fabian Hamilton and Mr. Marsha Singh, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the sale and consumption of intoxicating liquor in cases involving persons under eighteen; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 16 April, and to be printed [Bill 19].

Bus Fuel Duty (Exemptions)

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin, supported by Mr. John MacGregor, Mr. David Curry, Mr. A. J. Beith, Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, Mr. Harry Barnes, Dr. Julian Lewis, Mr. Oliver Letwin, Mr. Bowen Wells, Mr. Robert Syms, Mr. John Hayes and Judy Mallaber, presented a

Bill to exempt operators of certain community bus services from payment of excise duty on fuel used in operating those services; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March, and to be printed [Bill 20].

Streetworks

Mr. Peter Atkinson, on behalf of Mr. Christopher Fraser, presented a Bill to amend the law relating to streetworks; to make provision for a streetworks registration scheme; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March, and to be printed [Bill 21].

Cheques (Scotland)

Mr. John Swinney, supported by Dr. Lewis Moonie, Mr. Michael Moore, Mr. Desmond Swayne and Mr. Alasdair Morgan, presented a Bill to amend the law of Scotland in relation to the effect of presentation of cheques for payment: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March, and to be printed [Bill 22].

Nuclear Safeguards

Mr. Tony Colman presented a Bill to enable effect to be given to the protocol signed at Vienna on 22nd September 1998 additional to the agreement for the application of safeguards in the United Kingdom in connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March, and to be printed [Bill 23].

Health Care and Energy Efficiency

Sir Robert Smith, supported by Mr. Peter Bottomley, Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. Michael Colvin, Ms Roseanna Cunningham, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mrs. Linda Gilroy, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. John McAllion, Mr. Alan Simpson and Mr. James Wallace, presented a Bill to require certain health bodies to draw up reports on ways in which they may use energy efficiency schemes to assist persons living in fuel poverty to heat their homes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 23 April, and to be printed [Bill 24].

Road Traffic (Vehicle Testing)

Mr. Andrew Hunter, supported by Mr. Tony Colman, Mr. Humfrey Malins, Mr. Mark Oaten, Mr. Bill O'Brien, Mr. Richard Page and Mr. Brian Sedgemore, presented a Bill to make further provision about the testing of motor vehicles for the purposes of Part II of the Road Traffic Act 1988; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March, and to be printed [Bill 25].

Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare)

Mr. Tim Loughton, on behalf of Mr. James Clappison, supported by Mr. Roger Gale, Mr. Graham Brady, Sir Richard Body, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Richard Allan, Mr. Ian Cawsey, Angela Smith, Mr. Colin Pickthall, Mr. Andrew Miller and Caroline Flint, presented a Bill to amend and extend certain enactments relating to the commercial breeding and sale of dogs; to regulate the welfare of dogs kept in commercial breeding establishments; to extend powers of inspection; to establish records of dogs kept at such establishments; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March, and to be printed [Bill 26].

Public House Names

Mrs. Ann Winterton, supported by Mr. Roy Beggs, Mr. Crispin Blunt, Mr. Peter Bradley, Mr. Tom Cox, Dr. Lynne Jones, Mr. Kerry Pollard, Mr. David Rendel, Ms Christine Russell, Mr. Graham Stringer and Mr. Nicholas Winterton, presented a Bill to amend the law relating to the names of public houses; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March, and to be printed [Bill 27].

Hedges (Control)

Mr. Andrew Rowe presented a Bill to subject hedges in residential areas to local authority planning control: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 March, and to be printed [Bill 28].

Planning Appeals Bill

Mr. Nigel Evans, supported by Mr. Peter Atkinson, Mrs. Angela Browning, Dr. Julian Lewis, Miss Anne McIntosh, Mr. Andrew Robathan and Mr. Robert Syms, presented a Bill to remove the right of appeal to the Secretary of State against certain planning decisions: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 23 April, and to be printed [Bill 29].

Company and Business Names (Chamber of Commerce, etc.)

Mr. Andrew Lansley, supported by Mr. Michael Trend, Mr. Graham Brady, Mr. Richard Page, Mr. Nick Harvey, Mr. Robin Corbett, Ms Gisela Stuart, Mr. James Paice, Mr. Nick St. Aubyn and Mrs. Louise Ellman, presented a Bill to make provision concerning the approval of company or business names containing the expression "chamber of commerce" or any related expression; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed [Bill 30].

Fuel Poverty and Energy Conservation

Mr. John McAllion, supported by Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. David Chaytor, Ms Roseanna Cunningham, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Mr. Clive Efford, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mrs. Linda Gilroy, Mr. David Lepper, Sir Robert Smith, Mr. Alan Simpson and Mr. Matthew Taylor, presented a Bill to require energy conservation authorities to draw up reports concerning fuel poverty and to designate officers with responsibility for energy conservation; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March, and to be printed [Bill 31].

Opposition Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Government Information

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.35 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the extent to which politically-partisan presentation, spin-doctoring, unattributed briefing and the pursuit of personal rivalries between Ministers have become characteristics of the presentation of government information; believes that clearer guidelines need to be established in this field; affirms that the public interest is in having far greater access to the information used by Government in making decisions which affect people's lives; and calls upon the Government to introduce its draft Freedom of Information Bill as a matter of the highest priority to enable early consideration, to present such a Bill later this Session which can be carried over into the next Session of Parliament, and to ensure that the Bill fully reflects the proposals set out in the White Paper, *Your Right To Know*.

This is the second of three debates introduced by Liberal Democrats today. This morning, my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) introduced the debate on the crisis in the health service. This debate will be followed by a debate about Britain's leadership position in Europe.

Christmas is supposed to be a season of good will, but not for this Government. After the holiday, Westminster was strewn with political corpses on the scale of a gangster movie or a performance of "Macbeth". The main victims came from the ranks of those who are or have been responsible for purveying Government information. The battle had largely been about their activities.

The regime of partisan press briefing and press management that was at the centre of those events came into being after a series of high-profile departures of more traditional civil service press officers. One of them created the "Tumbrel Club" to describe the departed civil service press officers. Senior press officers from the Treasury, Department of Social Security, Ministry of Defence, Scottish Office, the Overseas Development Agency and the Northern Ireland Office all went as the new Government devised a new type of press operation.

In a telling piece of evidence to the Public Administration Committee, Steve Reardon, one of the casualties, said:

"The ostensible reason for my being required to leave my post was the need for a change of style"—

a phrase, he added, that

"I constructed at the behest of the Department to account for my going."

Perhaps some changes were needed. Perhaps better central co-ordination was required. Perhaps a sharper round-the-clock operation was needed. The bulk of the civil service press staff remain in place under new leadership. Are the new people at the top not doing a good job? In some respects they are, but the problems have proved very serious indeed. I refer particularly to their enthusiasm for unattributed briefing and spinning. Their very anonymity is often a deception on the public. Statements are made that are not open to challenge. No one knows whether they have any authenticity or credibility.

An extremely effective letter appeared in *The Independent* on Tuesday. It referred—interestingly, from my point of view—to a claim that had appeared in *The Independent* that the Deputy Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Home Secretary

"are to join forces in an attempt to prevent Mr. Blair calling a referendum on electoral reform before the next election."

The writer of the letter, Mr. Michael Kay, stated:

"I scoured the rest of the story for quotes from these three 'heavy-hitters'. Not a word. Andrew Grice quotes 'a source close to Mr. Brown'. Later in the story Colin Brown in Cape Town quotes 'one Blair aide'.

Who are these invisible people who must not be named?"

Mr. Kay went on:

"These incognito sources are the very spin doctors so reviled in your editorials. . . Reveal your sources. Some of your readers might find it intriguing to evaluate the quality of your material. Or is it none of our business?"

That is a fair and strong point, made by a member of the public in that correspondence.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): I read Mr. Kay's letter. I took it as a criticism of Mr. Grice, the Lobby system and the way that newspapers use it, not as a criticism of Government press officers.

Mr. Beith: If the hon. Gentleman continues to listen, as he is doing, he will find that some of my criticisms spread over on to those who operate the system. It takes two to operate the system—those purveying the dubious information, and those who put it into the media.

A great deal of work is done by the Government press machine to convey to media—which are sometimes gullible and sometimes just not in a position to make a proper assessment—a false picture of events. That is especially true when things must be done in a rush. One of the worst examples that I have ever known in 25 years in this place was the press pack on the Scott report under the previous Government. Journalists had no time to read that seven-volume report. They relied initially, at least, on the Government summary, which dealt almost entirely with the charges that had not been proved, ignoring the ones that had. When Lord Justice Scott was asked about that when giving evidence to a Committee, he agreed that the picture presented by the Government summary was not an accurate summary of his report. It was systematically selective information to give a false picture. It was sanctioned by civil servants as well as by political advisers.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does my right hon. Friend agree, on reflection, that the way in which the Scott report was handled provided eloquent confirmation of the contents of the report itself?

Mr. Beith: Indeed. I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on his recognition as a Privy Councillor in the new year's honours. I agree with his point.

Successive Governments have used similar techniques in public spending announcements, with press releases for Departments whose spending has been cut pretending that they have great new riches to spend on good causes.

I cannot remember a Budget-time press release in which a Department says that it will spend less in future, and that it is a very good thing that that will be so.

The spin doctors achieve the same thing in a different way. They do so by selectively trailing speeches that will promise new initiatives and new spending, when journalists have no access to the actual figures or to any advice on them. The spin doctors get away with repeated recycling of the same money. The Home Secretary did it on Tuesday and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment does it regularly. By trailing stories selectively, the process is bypassed by which major public announcements are supposed to be subject to questioning in the House. You have shown your strong disapproval of that practice, Madam Speaker. The practice is at least in part designed to avoid scrutiny by ensuring that an announcement is taken as news at face value. The favourable message is clearly established in the broadcast bulletins well before it can be undermined by any inconvenient facts.

I say to those involved in the Government press machine that it is a mistake to assume that Ministers will always get a less favourable story if they submit themselves to scrutiny in the House. Look for example, at the press coverage of the Foreign Secretary being questioned by the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), on Monday. As one of the sketch writers described the Opposition Front-Bench attack,

"with enemies like these, who needs friends?"

It is not necessarily in the Government's interests to go about things in this way and undermine a process that is good at ensuring that announcements that are all hyperbole and not substantial are challenged effectively and questioned and that someone who has a sound case to put gets a fair hearing.

The Government press team prefer not to take the risk of letting Ministers win the argument. It would rather get the retaliation in first.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I wonder whether the agreement that was entered into by the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was accurately reported in the press.

Mr. Beith: It was extremely inaccurately commented on very widely. A fair degree of publicity was given to the precise words that had been used in the correspondence between my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister. I refer those who are interested to the quotable words and not to any unattributed briefing from any source.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On that point—

Mr. Beith: I was going to say much more about it. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will wait for a while. He may find that I cover something that he wants to say. If not, he can have another try later.

Anonymous briefing can be seriously damaging to Britain's national interest. The classic instance was when the now famous Mr. Charlie Whelan set out to convey that the Government's policy on entering the single currency was roughly the opposite of what the Chancellor of the Exchequer said it was. The Chancellor had produced a measured interview for *The Times*, setting out the information that the Government would put the issue to the British people if and when they judged that the economic circumstances were right for them to do so, leaving open the option of a referendum before the next election.

From his office in the bar of the Red Lion, Mr. Whelan phoned journalists on his mobile phone to say that the Chancellor really meant to say that there would be no referendum this side of the next general election. I remember the incident well because I was phoned by the BBC's "The World Tonight" and asked to comment on the change in the Government's policy, which had come from a good source in government.

The story seemed so implausible to me that I rang our press office, which assured me that there was indeed such a source. One of our staff had been in the Red Lion off duty, and could not avoid—*[Interruption.]* Our man in the Red Lion could not avoid hearing the call made by Mr. Whelan, who is never sotto voce. There is no soft pedal on his piano. The Chancellor's measured interview was effectively torn up. No one knew what was the real story, the Government's credibility was damaged and markets were left in confusion. That is not what I would call a good day's work.

Another frequent criticism is that Government spin doctors get their way by bullying and intimidating. Chris Buckland wrote of Charlie Whelan that

"he is suspected of punishing those who refuse to toe the line by freezing them out. He is even thought to have suggested that editors should sack senior political staff."

However, it takes two to spin, according to Derek Draper—and he should know. The press do not have to play the game, even if, in Buckland's words,

"the fallout from his"—

Whelan's—

"briefings kept everyone in business for days or even weeks."

The bullying is all bluster. Responding to it in the hope of being given a juicy story in the future is too high a price to pay. Perhaps the Government's recent problems have been greater because more journalists realise that. The spin doctor's bluff has been called.

It is remarkable—indeed, it is poetic justice—that the victims of the excessive use of spin doctor techniques include the Government themselves. The murky atmosphere of anonymous briefing may be seen as a means of assisting the Government, but it is also an environment in which unattributed personal attacks and character assassinations flourish. That did not start with the current Government: John Biffen was famously described as a "semi-detached" member of the Cabinet by what was then referred to as a Downing street source, which was of course Sir Bernard Ingham. Sir Bernard also called Francis Pym "Mona Lott".

There are, however, deep personal rivalries in the present Government, and such enhanced scope and status have been given to partisan press officers that they have caused the Government serious damage. It is not as if they were not warned that that would happen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) pointed out in an Adjournment debate last year,

"The issues that I shall raise may be batted away today . . . but the Government are on a sticky wicket and eventually they will

find themselves out if they do not take action."—[*Official Report*, 24 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 1152.]

They have certainly found themselves out.

The Minister most associated with spin doctor techniques, the past master of the black arts, himself lost his senior Cabinet post because someone—we do not know who it was—maliciously leaked details of the private loan by which he had financed his rather grand choice of house. A Cabinet Minister of undoubted talent and dedication, who had an important contribution to make as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, has been lost to the Government because of the culture that he, in his previous role, had helped to create.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: As the right hon. Gentleman is talking about unattributed briefings and the pursuit of personal rivalries, he may wish to cast his memory back. Many of us watched last year's Liberal Democrat conference with great interest, hearing a spate of statements emanating from unattributed briefings by, we are told, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)—that may, of course, be incorrect—and others about the future prospects of the party leader, the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown). What does the right hon. Gentleman have to say about that?

Mr. Beith: I have never heard of my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey saying anything remotely unattributable.

The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) interrupted me as I was reaching a serious point about the resignation of the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). The right hon. Gentleman did not resign because of any abuse of public office, or any failure of policy—matters for which Ministers should more often resign. In fact, he resigned as a consequence of the culture that he had helped to create, and that has deprived him of the opportunity to give service that some—perhaps even all—of his colleagues in the Government would have valued highly. The Prime Minister may be able to pull waving Danes into his dinghy, but if we are to judge from the reactions of some Labour Members, it will take him a lot longer to pull the right hon. Member for Hartlepool back on board.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): There are practical consequences to the departure of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). My right hon. Friend will know that the north-east of Scotland is highly dependent on the oil industry, which faces crisis as the world oil price appears to be staying low. As Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool was due to chair a task force this week to consider strategies to help the industry. The consequence of his having fallen into a trap is delay in dealing with real, practical problems.

Mr. Beith: That shows how real problems in the real world result from what seem to be games in the hothouse world of Westminster, and particularly of Whitehall press briefings.

One resignation was not the end of the story. Following the resignation of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool, the then Paymaster General—the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson)—also resigned, ostensibly on the same issue, although it somewhat strained credulity to try to imagine that other matters over a period had not contributed. Of course, the title of Paymaster General is something of an historical oddity, but it was spot on when the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West was in opposition.

Then, one of the two most prominent political press officers in the Government's service found himself scanning the job advertisements. Incidentally, can the Minister for the Cabinet Office tell us whether that is all that he now does? Does he sit at his desk reading the job advertisements and sending out his curriculum vitae, or is he engaged in Government work? Unwanted civil servants used to be sent on "gardening leave". Has he not got a garden? Perhaps the former Paymaster General and the Britannia building society could help him. Again, I have a serious point. Will he be restricted in the private sector posts that he can take up because of the access to Government information that he has had? Is he continuing to have that sort of access? We are entitled to know that. Other senior Treasury civil servants would be restricted if they moved out to a private sector post.

Negative briefing about other Ministers and officials was not limited to the Chancellor's team. A Downing street spokesman was quoted referring to Mr. Whelan as "a little oik". I still find it extraordinary that so many Ministers and their advisers should be prepared to inflict damage on their own Government by denigrating other parts of that Government. They fire shots at each other, which make holes in the boat in which they are all sailing, and I do not know why that does not occur to them from time to time.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that his colleagues never talk about each other? Perhaps I can brief him privately after this debate about the occasion on which my wife and I were in Gandhi's listening to two partners of two of his colleagues discuss his future and that of a number of other Liberal Democrat Members. That behaviour is not unique to one party.

Mr. Beith: At least no one is being paid out of public funds to do it.

In dealing with such matters, the lead must come from the top. No one could accuse the Government's chief press officer of failing to lead or to do a diligent, skilled and generally pretty effective job on behalf of the Government and, more particularly, the Prime Minister. He slaps down Ministers for being off message or for failing to clear their media appearances. I see no sign of leadership by example or by precept against negative briefing, yet we are talking about behaviour that is forbidden in the Government's model contract for special advisers, which is mentioned in the Government amendment. Section viii of schedule 1 states:

> "Special advisers . . . must observe discretion and express comment with moderation, and avoid personal attacks".

I am not aware of any disciplinary proceeding against any special adviser for breaking that rule. It is not even a case of "Three strikes and you're out", which may be one way to tackle it.

That leads me directly to the role of Alastair Campbell, the Government's chief press secretary.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): Much of what the right hon. Gentleman has said has been amusing and entertaining, although he is making a meal of it, but Alastair Campbell is not the Government's chief spokesman. He is the Prime Minister's official spokesman; the head of the Government Information and Communications Service is an entirely different person. The right hon. Gentleman should do his homework more carefully and get those details right.

Mr. Beith: I do not think that anyone anywhere in the system would deny the leadership role exercised by Alastair Campbell. No one who has been in receipt of any of his missives could imagine that he was behaving other than from a position of leadership as regards the entire Government press and information operation.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) *rose—*

Mr. Beith: I shall develop this point before I give way. The position of the Prime Minister's chief spokesman has developed—with considerable controversy—under successive Governments. Under Mrs. Thatcher, Bernard Ingham's role moved a lot of boundaries and was the subject of much criticism at the time. Following the Mountfield report and a special Order in Council, that position has developed distinctive features under this Administration. Mr. Campbell is a special adviser, but, unlike any other, he has management responsibility for the civil service. He is neither a Cabinet Minister nor a member of the Cabinet secretariat, yet he attends Cabinet meetings. I can see the case for that. It is better that a senior press officer understands the full background to the decisions that he has to explain. However, if those privileges are given, they should be accompanied by tighter rules about what is acceptable in someone who does not have all the responsibilities, restrictions and disciplines to which established civil servants are subject.

Mr. Campbell is identified, although not by name, as the Prime Minister's official spokesman. I welcome that change too, because at least when that phrase is used we know who said something and what authority it carries, which we never knew when absurd phrases such as "Downing street says" or "sources close to the Secretary of State say" were used. What sources? How reliable are they? Who authorised them? We are not allowed to know, and so cannot evaluate what is reported. Journalists should be less willing to play this game, even if it costs them a story or two.

Now that the official spokesman's role is acknowledged, we may as well acknowledge the individual as well and end the farce of a senior public official being seen on television trying unsuccessfully to get out of the shot while some present or resigning Minister is interviewed. It is like the Punch and Judy man who forgets to keep his head down and appears in the frame between the puppets that he is supposed to be operating. When a political adviser takes on powers that have always been reserved to impartial civil servants, sits at Cabinet meetings and is identified as an official spokesman, he must also be charged with a duty, under the responsibility of the head of the home civil service, to maintain and inculcate principles of objectivity, fairness and loyalty, both to the Government as a whole and to the integrity of the public service as a whole.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman knows, and will forgive me for taking the liberty of reminding him, that Orders in Council created three special adviser posts, two of which are filled by Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell. They set out clearly the terms, conditions and responsibilities of the posts. One of the many novelties introduced by the Government in the cause of modernisation, transparency and accountability was the model contract for special advisers, which sets out clearly their responsibilities. Does he accept that Alastair Campbell's contract, unlike that of any other special adviser, has been placed in the public domain?

Mr. Beith: I was aware of all those things. I referred to the Order in Council and pointed out that the model contract was in force when all these things happened. If the model contract is working, why did they happen? Why have all the Government's problems arisen? Someone must make more effort to ensure that the contract is abided by.

The Order in Council was essential because, without it, no civil servant would have been required to accept instructions from Alastair Campbell. The process is entirely proper, procedurally correct and in place, but certain responsibilities assume a larger importance in that light. One could react in different ways to this situation, which has undoubtedly caused a fair bit of harm. More people could be sacked, to add to those who have already resigned, or we could try to find a way of ensuring that the system—not all of which we can object to or stem the tide of—observes proper boundaries and that things damaging to the public interest or the Government do not happen under it.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I have the model special adviser contract. Page 12 states:

"Special Advisers must not take public part in political controversy . . . must observe discretion and express comment with moderation, and avoid personal attacks".

Does my right hon. Friend think that that applies to Mr. Alastair Campbell?

Mr. Beith: My hon. Friend has done much work on this and first brought the right hon. Member for Hartlepool to the House to answer questions on his responsibilities. He is merely giving a fuller quotation of the passage in the model contract, which I consider applies to all special advisers, that I quoted earlier. Someone has not been keeping the terms of that contract. We do not necessarily know who in the case of the leaking of the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's loan details. Somewhere along the line, the rules are being broken. It is not relevant to insist that the Prime Minister's principal press spokesman observes the contract but that he takes the lead in ensuring that they are observed throughout the service in which he plays such a key role.

The implications of the duties need to be spelled out more clearly at various levels in the Government information services and among ministerial advisers

[Mr. Beith]

and Ministers. The Public Administration Committee published a report on those issues last July. The Government's response has not yet been published, although I think that it has been sent to the Committee. There were two reports, one from the Government's side and one from the Opposition. In their rather more timid offering, even the Government's supporters on the Committee call for a clear code of rules. Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members produced minority conclusions that went further by calling for tapes of Lobby briefings to be kept for a year and for political appointees who do significant party political activities to be paid from party funds. They also called for the Modernisation Committee to consider your concerns, Madam Speaker, about the sharp growth in pre-briefing of Government announcements, which should be made first in Parliament. I am not sure that the Modernisation Committee is the right Committee to do that, but the matter certainly needs considering further.

What is the Government's response to the challenges to clean up their press act, especially now that they have seen that they, too, can be the victims of a practice that has got completely out of hand? The Government's amendment to our motion refers to the model contract for special advisers, dating from May 1977, which has been in existence throughout all these abuses, and which has clearly been flouted.

The amendment refers to

"the long accepted conventions of impartiality and propriety".

Partiality and impropriety are acknowledged to have taken place. I suspect that the Minister for the Cabinet Office knows that something needs to be done, and he would do himself and the Government credit if he admitted it and told us precisely what he intends to do. If he does not intend doing anything, the Government will soon be in trouble again on these matters.

The information that the public actually want is rarely the kind of information that press officers are briefed to provide. It is information that they are denied by the operation of official secrecy and the absence of a freedom of information Act. Gulf war veterans want to know to what health risks they were subject and what tests are or are not being carried out on their exposure to depleted uranium, yet that information is fiercely guarded.

People wanted to know what the Government knew about bovine spongiform encephalopathy. That is coming out at this late stage only because there is an inquiry. They want to know what the Health and Safety Executive knows about the pollution being emitted by a factory. They want to know why the Medicines Control Agency will not license a drug that they think will help them. That is the kind of information that affects their lives or livelihoods, which is so often closely guarded by Government, and which they will not have unless we have a freedom of information Act. The Government promised us one, but where is it?

In a written answer on 21 July 1998, the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), said that the Government's aim was to publish the draft Bill by the end of September. Then he became a casualty, and let us not forget the negative briefing to which he was subjected.

Almost four months have passed since the Government's target date for publication. The draft Bill will be considered this Session, but a final Bill is unlikely to be introduced until the 1999–2000 Session, pushing the implementation of such legislation into the next millennium. That is hardly appropriate for legislation that the Government described in July 1998 as a priority issue.

When the right hon. Member for South Shields was removed from office, responsibility for the freedom of information Bill was transferred to the Home Office. Since then, progress on the draft Bill has slowed.

Liberal Democrats have always regarded the implementation of a freedom of information Act as a priority to provide a right of access to all but the most sensitive information. The Labour party has been committed to freedom of information for, I think, 25 years, and it was included in its 1977 election manifesto. The pre-election "Cook-Maclennan" talks also agreed that the public have a right to know what Government are doing in their name, and committed both parties to the cause.

Roy Hattersley said, before the 1922 election—I mean, the 1992 election. Roy Hattersley is very senior, but he carries his age better than that. He said before the 1992 election that a freedom of information Bill should begin on Labour's first day in Government before its errors in office reduced its enthusiasm for reform.

It is a sad fact that political parties' interest in freedom of information seems to wane as their ability to do something about it increases. The Government have an opportunity to prove that wrong. The Home Secretary claims that delay is caused by difficulty in drafting the legislation. But the former Chancellor of the Duchy has said that the draft Bill was 90 per cent. complete when he left office. Are the Government now saying that he left the most difficult bits until last?

It is now 13 months since the White Paper was published. That should have been ample time for the Government to translate a far-reaching and detailed White Paper into a draft Bill. After all, they have to prepare only a draft Bill. It is not the last word. It will go for scrutiny to the appropriate Committee of the House over several months, and amendments and corrections can still be made, so it does not matter if there are some mistakes in the Bill at this stage. Let us get the process going.

If the Bill is introduced this month, it could be examined by the Select Committee on Public Administration in the spring, and the final Bill could then be introduced in this Session and carried over to the next Session. I believe that the Government will use that procedure for the financial services and electronic commerce Bills. If they are really committed to freedom of information, they should take urgent action to ensure that the Bill is ready at the earliest opportunity.

The Home Secretary has publicly claimed to support greater openness in government and claims that he is demonstrating that. The biggest test will be in the extent to which his draft Bill meets the far-reaching proposals in the White Paper "Your Right to Know", which we welcomed and want to see enacted. Many advocates of freedom of information are concerned that the Bill may water down the strong proposals in the White Paper.

There are many supporters of greater openness both inside and outside Parliament. In the previous Session, 241 hon. Members, 195 of them Labour, signed an

early-day motion expressing concern at the prospect of any delay in bringing the measure forward. It was one of the most popular early-day motions in that Session. The Government's Back Benchers are with us in saying, "Get on with it."

Let us have more of the information that the public really want through a freedom of information Act and less of the partisan spin doctoring, which started out as a means of managing the message and has ended up with blood all over the carpet. Clearer rules about what people can and cannot do should be established and implemented. It is a job in which the enforcer presumably has a role to play. I hope that he will now tell us what he is going to do.

4.6 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Dr. Jack Cunningham): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the Government's commitment to modernising Government; commends the professionalism of the Government Information and Communications Service (GICS) in carrying out the important task of effectively communicating and explaining policies, decisions and actions of the Government of the day; recognises that the Mountfield Report set out the future direction of the GICS and confirmed the long accepted conventions of impartiality and propriety; believes that the model contract for special advisers, which defined, for the first time in a public document, the roles and responsibilities of special advisers, should be welcomed; applauds the Government's intention to publish a draft Freedom of Information Bill as soon as possible; and welcomes the intention of the Select Committee on Public Administration to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill."

Let me try to deal quickly with what I will describe as the first part of the entertaining, if rather long drawn-out, speech of the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). He began by talking about some of the changes that have taken place. I will not accept any criticism of a Government who have come in after 18 years of a previous Administration of an entirely different kind and made changes. When the previous Conservative Administration changed Prime Ministers, they changed personnel. That is in the nature of a change of Government. Of course, changes have been made and there will be more to come because the Government are about changing Britain. I cannot accept the idea that we should have continued exactly as before with the same personnel and the same approach as under the previous Administration.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made much of anonymous comments and quotes. As I have said, he spoke with considerable humour, and, by describing those comments as anonymous, he defined the nature of the problem. The fact that they are anonymous makes it difficult for anyone, however great the will, to do anything about them. When we read in the newspaper, "Friends of Mr. Ashdown", we all know that that means the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) or his office. We can all read the code. In fact, we read that quite frequently in the newspapers and hear it on the radio and television. The other claim—that the Liberal Democrats are as white as driven snow and that the Labour and Conservative parties are mired in this business of spinning or briefing either against parties or between parties—is something else that I cannot understand.

As has been pointed out, at the last Liberal Democrat conference, we were regaled with a number of candidates who were lining themselves up to replace the right hon. Member for Yeovil. Let us not pretend that this is a problem of only one or two parties and that, somehow, other political parties, important or large or small, are somehow immune to it or have been inoculated against its temptations.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed asked me what I intend to do about it. I am inclined to photocopy the Sermon on the Mount and place it on the walls of the offices of all my ministerial colleagues and their advisers, particularly that part which says:

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin".

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the right hon. Gentleman prepared to guarantee this afternoon that no current serving member of the Cabinet has, since 1 May 1997, made a disobliging remark about a Cabinet colleague to a journalist at any time?

Dr. Cunningham: Of course not. The hon. Gentleman knows very well that he is making a demand to which I could not possibly respond in the way that he suggests. I reflected recently on my role and responsibilities in a conversation with the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) who once performed a similar role, although it was as the Deputy Prime Minister in the previous Administration. He told me of some of his experiences. One Friday, he was alerted to the fact that there would be nine or 10 anti-Government stories in the Sunday newspapers. He got his team together and it went to work through Friday, Friday evening and Saturday. On Sunday, there were 27 anti-Government stories in the Sunday newspapers. So let us not pretend that our esteemed friends and colleagues who report on our proceedings in this Chamber and elsewhere are not themselves sometimes the unwitting victims of some of this stuff or simply fall to the temptation of writing it. Unfortunately, some of them seem to be addicted to it. The reality is that it will never completely go away.

I say to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and everyone else in the House that it is a bit much to focus a significant part of a speech on any person who does not have the opportunity to come here, join in the debate and speak up on his own behalf.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cunningham: No, not for the moment. I want to make this point.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) intervened in the speech of the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed to say that, had it not been for the unfortunate resignation, as he put it, of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), some action may have been taken in respect of problems facing the oil industry. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not persuade his right hon. Friend to hold the debate on the oil industry rather than the subject that the Liberal party has chosen.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed even said that we knew what happened in the horrendous catastrophe of BSE only because the Government set up a judicial inquiry, as though it was an error for us to set it up. We set up the inquiry exactly because we wanted the facts to come out for the benefit and information of

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the public. I should have thought that that was one matter on which the right hon. Gentleman would be persuaded to give us some credit.

One can go back through the reports, debates and activities of the House for decades, nay, generations. It was Churchill, after all, who said that nothing should be allowed to interfere with the rancour and asperity of politics. That was a very long time ago. We know that there is rivalry not simply between parties but within parties. I say to the right hon. Member for Berwick–upon–Tweed, to my colleagues and to the House that of course one wants to minimise the consequences of that. I have made it clear in recent interviews and broadcasts as part of my responsibilities that the Prime Minister wants the message to go out clearly that he expects his Ministers to work in a coherent team not only in the best interests of the Government but essentially and more importantly in the best interests of the country and its people as a whole.

Let me turn to some of the matters of more substance that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed raised. He talked about people who were in powerful positions properly exercising that power. I agree with him on that. That is essential. Anyone who has worked, or works, closely with any Prime Minister is in a position of considerable power. I worked with Lord Callaghan when he was Prime Minister as his Parliamentary Private Secretary. I saw a great deal of him and was involved in much of what he did. Cabinet Ministers used to stop me and consult me, ask me questions and ask my opinion. When I left that position and became a junior Minister, they used to pass me in the corridor as if I were invisible. Anyone who works closely with a Prime Minister is in a powerful position. I agree that it is essential that we have in place safeguards and that we ensure the proper exercise of that power.

It is exactly for the reasons that I have given that we were the first Government to publish the model contract for the employment of people such as Alastair Campbell. No Government had done that ever before. While I accept that some people may be critical of some of the terms and conditions of that contract, I am not aware that any Member of the House from any party has written to us suggesting any amendments to it. I assure the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed that there is no evidence of any abuse of that proper exercise of power, nor did he produce any such evidence.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is it not also the case that what marked out the Labour Government was that they got rid of almost all the in-house information officers in each Department, because they wanted their message to be put across not in an official way, but by spin?

Dr. Cunningham: That is not true; it is a wholly inaccurate statement. I assume that the hon. Gentleman could not have listened carefully to my opening remarks, because the first point that I made to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed was that we were determined to make some changes; changes in policy, certainly, but also necessary changes in personnel, where they were appropriate. As I also emphasised, changes in personnel were made by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) when Baroness Thatcher left 10 Downing street; there is nothing wrong with that at all—although whether those changes were an improvement is another matter.

I must move on to some of the issues of greater substance raised by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. I am pleased to have the opportunity to put on record the Government's appreciation of the important work done by the Government Information and Communications Service. When he discussed the service, the right hon. Gentleman largely confined his remarks to only two people in the whole of a large, extensive and effective service. The staff of that service play a key role, all day and every day, in carrying out the important task of effectively communicating and explaining the policies, decisions and actions of the Government of the day. They do so through the media and through paid publicity campaigns, conducted in an appropriate way, having regard to the need to be able to justify the costs to public funds. In my experience, they perform that task effectively, efficiently and impartially, providing a service as politically impartial civil servants, in line with the civil service code introduced by the previous Administration in January 1996.

Hon. Members will recall that the code was based on the draft proposed by the Treasury Committee. Surely, there can be no complaint between us about the important work of the Government Information and Communications Service.

Since the election, the Government have set a challenging pace in their programme of reform and improvement, and we shall continue to do so. The GICS press and publicity staff have put considerable energy and skill into supporting the Government's programme and, during the past year, they have done so while shouldering the burden of change. The changes are not yet complete, but I should like to take this opportunity to thank the staff for their professionalism and commitment.

Mr. Beith: The right hon. Gentleman will note that I expressed my appreciation of the work done by the civil service part of the Government's press machine and, indeed, of some of the work done by the Government's more political special adviser press officers. However, he must be aware that, on the civil service side of the press machine, there has been considerable anxiety that the pace of change also involved pushing at what had been long understood to be fairly clear boundaries about what constitutes non-partisan behaviour and what is going too far in the direction of commitment to the Government, as opposed to the public administration system as a whole. It would be unreasonable if he did not recognise that there are anxieties that need to be allayed.

Dr. Cunningham: Shortly after Labour came into office, the then head of the home civil service, Sir Robin Butler, commissioned a review into the GICS which was undertaken by a small group chaired by Sir Robin Mountfield, the permanent secretary in the Cabinet Office. It examined what needed to be done to ensure that the GICS was in a position to meet the demands of what is now a 24-hour media world.

The review was prompted by concerns not about the politicisation of the service, but about ensuring that the service had the skills and resources necessary to take it

into the 21st century. I remind the House that the group was headed by Sir Robin Mountfield, the Cabinet Office permanent secretary, not by a politician. Its main recommendations were: to improve co-ordination with and from the centre through a new strategic communications unit; to improve co-ordination within departments so that Ministers, special advisers, press officers and policy civil servants all play their part in the coherent formulation and communication of policy; to bring the practice and procedures of the Government press offices up to the standards of the best, geared to quick response around the clock—sometimes I wish that it could be even quicker; to develop closer and better working relations between policy civil servants and press offices; and, finally and most importantly, to reaffirm that the service would remain politically impartial to sustain its trusted values.

One of the Government's earliest decisions, in July 1997, was to publish the latest version of the rules, the "Guidance on the Work of the Government Information Service". Thus, we again published the conclusions and recommendations. The result of the review was a continuing programme of action to ensure that the Mountfield recommendations are given the priority that they deserve. A progress report on them was placed in the Library of the House last summer and we hope to publish the next progress reports shortly. If any hon. Member wants to complain about the recommendations or their implementation, I invite him or her to talk to me in the Cabinet Office, or write to me, and I shall take the matter up. As I said about abuse of power, we have had no such complaints, suggestions or recommendations for change or improvement from any party in the House.

Our decision to have a strong centre with political drive to ensure a firm political focus to the work of this Administration was a pre-election commitment. We have increased the numbers of special advisers and there are now some 70 full and part-time special advisers employed across Whitehall, but I make no apology for that. Equally, it is important that we keep the number in perspective: it is extremely small compared with the number of permanent civil servants.

We have been open about the number of special advisers and the terms and conditions under which they are appointed. For the first time ever, we published a "Model Contract for Special Advisers", making clear their role and responsibilities.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Cunningham: No, not at the moment.

The model contract was promulgated by the Prime Minister and placed in the Library of the House in May 1997. Distinguishing clearly the roles of special advisers and permanent civil servants ensures that there is no misunderstanding about their respective roles. I am aware of no genuine misunderstanding about that. I regularly meet civil servants not only from my Department, the Cabinet Office, but from other Departments; indeed, I regularly meet the civil service unions, as the House would expect of me. No one from the civil service has raised any complaints of that nature with me in the admittedly all-too-brief time in which I have held these responsibilities.

Equally, by acknowledging the role of special advisers in that way, we protect the political neutrality of the permanent civil service. I agree with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed that it is essential that that is done. The only exception to the general rules regarding the advisory role of special advisers applies to the Prime Minister's chief of staff and press secretary—his official spokesman.

As the Parliamentary Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) said in an intervention, immediately after the election, the Civil Service Order in Council 1995 was amended to enable up to three posts in the Prime Minister's office to have additional powers, allowing it to have civil servants working for it. Once again, we were entirely open about our intentions. Of those three posts, only two have been taken up. We believe that, to be truly effective, those posts should not be filled by individuals who would be expected to perform a similar role for an Administration of a different political party.

The Prime Minister's chief of staff and the Prime Minister's press secretary—like all other civil servants—are accountable to Ministers, who in turn are accountable to Parliament. What they can and cannot do is set out clearly in their contracts. The Prime Minister's press secretary made public his contract following a request from the Select Committee on Public Administration.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed rightly focused on a freedom of information Act. I share his general objectives in the matter, as do the Government. The Government entirely agree that the public interest is best served by greater access to information. That has been demonstrated many times in what we have already done. I think of the judicial inquiry into BSE, the encouragement of advisory committees to appoint watchdogs and consumer representatives and to publish their agendas and minutes, and the interesting and important development in departmental web sites. I agree that much more can be done in that regard. None the less, all those developments have been going on, and continue to do so.

The Government's major programme of constitutional reform—another objective that we share with the Liberal Democrats—aims to involve people more closely in decisions that affect their lives. That is done through changing not just institutional structures, but the way in which our institutions work. That means greater openness, greater accountability and greater contact with individuals and organisations outside government and Whitehall.

I personally feel very strongly committed to such aims and objectives. A good example of what I am talking about is the discussion forum on modernising government, which the Cabinet Office and No. 10 Downing street have jointly launched on the internet today. People will be able to call up the site, give their views about what they would like, see some of our working documents and comment on them.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed is right to say that the key component of the programme is a freedom of information Act. We believe that such an Act will lead to greater accountability, more involvement of the public in decision making, better decision making across the public sector and, ultimately, better government.

The Government published their proposals in December 1997 in a White Paper, "Your Right To Know". That was a major step towards fulfilling our manifesto commitment to legislate for freedom of

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information. I pay tribute to the work done on that by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark).

The Home Office took over responsibility for freedom of information legislation from the Cabinet Office when changes were made to the Government in the summer, in order to enable policy to be developed alongside other constitutional measures, such as human rights and data protection. That has also allowed my Department to concentrate on its new role of supporting the Prime Minister, and the Government as a whole, in driving forward strategic policy formulation and implementation. In addition, a great deal of my Department's work is aimed at producing the White Paper on modernising government and ensuring that that programme is taken forward across the Government.

Following those developments, the Home Office has devoted a great deal of effort to translating the White Paper's proposals into a draft Bill. I can say that with absolute authority because I am a member of the committee that is working to produce that Bill. We plan to publish a draft freedom of information Bill shortly. We then look forward to a thorough and informed debate. Following consultation, the Bill will be introduced as soon as the legislative programme allows. I accept the point by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed that, realistically, given the timetable that we face, it is unlikely to be possible to steer the Bill through all stages this Session, even if it were possible to agree on it being carried over to the next Session.

The Select Committee on Public Administration has asked for three months to scrutinise the Bill. The Government want to meet that commitment on behalf of the House. We have also undertaken, quite properly, to provide a period of public consultation. It will be proper consultation, in which the views of respondents will be taken into account. We hope and believe that consultation and scrutiny will lead to a better Bill, resulting in the smoother passage of Bills in general.

The freedom of information Bill will be a highly complex piece of legislation, as I well know, and it is vital for the Act in which it will result to be effective and workable. I know that some people think that we have waited long enough, but surely it is worth taking just a little more time to do all that we can to ensure that we get the legislation right.

The Government have acknowledged the importance of the Government Information and Communications Service to the effective development and implementation of policy. We have reaffirmed the political integrity and impartiality of the service, and we are making progress towards a freedom of information Act that will form just one part of the wholesale modernisation of the government and constitution of this country.

For those reasons, I urge the House to reject the Liberal Democrat motion and support our amendment.

4.31 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The official Opposition endorse the criticisms in the Liberal Democrat motion of the Labour party's treatment of the Government Information and Communications Service. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on his perceptive and important speech. Like him, I deplore the obsession with appearance as opposed to substance. I hope that progress can be made with freedom of information legislation, although I must add that I do not think such legislation will solve the problem that the right hon. Gentleman described at the beginning of his speech.

On the subject of freedom of information, I was concerned to receive today, from the Cabinet Office, a reply to a letter that I had written to the Minister on 1 December. Six weeks later, the letter states:

"He"—

the Minister—

"had hoped to reply to your letter by now and is very sorry he is unable to do so as advice is being sought from the Freedom of Information unit."

I hope that the Government's objective is to accelerate rather than delay the distribution of information to hon. Members.

The Liberal Democrats have identified an important issue, but if I were offered the first Opposition day debate of 1999, with the Government very much on the defensive—with the national health service facing a crisis, the retail trade trying to recover from a difficult Christmas, agriculture on its knees and the Chancellor sticking to a growth forecast that hardly anyone else believes—I am not sure that, given that promising list of targets, my prime suspect would be the Government Information and Communications Service. The Liberal Democrats' choice of subject tells us something about the dilemma that confronts them: they are having to decide, basically, whether they are with the Government or against them.

Mr. Beith *rose—*

Sir George Young: Perhaps I will pre-empt the right hon. Gentleman's intervention if I add that the motion is serious, and deserves a better response than the one that we have just heard.

Mr. Beith: The right hon. Gentleman is very generous, but he may have missed the fact that we spent a considerable part of the morning engaging in a major and well-attended debate about the crisis in the health service, initiated by a Liberal Democrat.

Sir George Young: It is true that a debate lasting an hour and a half took place this morning on pay and conditions for NHS nurses, but that is not quite the same as a three-hour debate on an Opposition day.

There are many ways of describing both the worrying changes in the presentation of Government policy that have occurred since 1997, and the shift in the terms of trade between policy maker and policy presenter. One of the best ways of explaining the change is, perhaps, to refer to a chart that appeared in a Sunday newspaper 10 days ago. On one side of the chart—in favour of a proposition—were pictured seven Cabinet Ministers, with their individual views; on the other side—against the proposition—were seven other Cabinet Ministers, with their views. At the bottom of the page were six more, described as maintaining a discreet pager silence.

What was the important issue? Was it early entry into the euro, increasing the top rate of tax, giving nurses the full amount recommended by the pay review body,

reforming the House of Lords? No; the issue was whether Mr. Charles Whelan, a junior Treasury official, should be sacked. That that should have become the currency of serious political debate is a direct consequence of the style of news management that we now have, and of the status given by the present Government to those who are believed to have particular presentational skills. The fact that Charlie Whelan's resignation overshadowed the launch of the first European single currency since the Romans tells us that we have a Government whose priorities are distorted—they are preoccupied with packaging as opposed to content.

It is not just Liberal Democrats and Conservatives who find that offensive. A growing number of Labour Members are reacting against the power that the Government have given to the spin doctors. Two of the bolder ones raised the matter on a point of order on Monday on the first day back after the Christmas recess.

We have become so accustomed to the partisan briefings of the Chancellor's former press secretary that it is necessary to be reminded of the ground rules—the official guidance on the work of the Government Information and Communications Service, which was circulated by the Cabinet Office in July 1997. Paragraph 2 tells us that the activities of the service

"should be objective and explanatory, not tendentious or polemical."

It goes on to say that they

"should not be, or be liable to misrepresentation as being, Party political."

The guidance goes on to say that the resources of the Government information service

"may not be used to support publicity for Party political purposes",

and that

"personalisation of issues or personal image-making should be avoided".

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman was just complaining about the devotion of pages of the national newspapers to matters of trivia, yet here he is devoting the opening part of his speech to the same trivia. It is obvious, as the Prime Minister and I, and others, have made clear, that the Government would much prefer such stuff not to be in the national newspapers, but the right hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that we are in charge of their editorial policy as well, is he?

Sir George Young: The right hon. Gentleman misses the point. We have a new Administration who are obsessed with presentation. They have changed the terms of trade and attach almost as much importance to those with presentational skills as to those who have the ability to formulate policy. They are paying the price for that because the press are diverting attention to those who carry the message and not focusing on the substance. Frankly, the Government have no one else to blame for the problems over the past three weeks but themselves.

I have referred to the new rules that were brought in by the Government. As I looked through the mountain of press cuttings that have been kindly supplied by the Library, I was struck by the number of commentators—not politicians—who believe that, to put it kindly, the rules have been stretched to breaking point and that injury is being done both to our tradition of a professional and impartial civil service and to the concept of not using taxpayers' funds for party political purposes.

To understand what has happened, first one must look at the key position of Alastair Campbell. It is no secret that he was closely associated with the presentation of Labour's policy in opposition. He is personally deeply committed to the Prime Minister and to the Labour party. He is now technically a special adviser—a ministerial appointment—and not a civil servant. His importance is due to the fact that, both in opposition and in government, the Prime Minister places a premium on presentation. That is why, in last weekend's edition of *The Sunday Times*, the former director of information at the Department of Health said:

"his power over the commanding heights of Government makes Alastair effectively deputy prime minister. Sorry, Mr. Prescott."

That person held that post until January 1.

Not only can Mr. Campbell now get involved in party political controversy, but, by an amendment to the Civil Service Order in Council 1995, he was given executive power and instructs civil servants. However, the civil servants are, of course, bound by the guidance from which I have quoted. A political animal giving leadership to a non-political service inevitably gives rise to tension.

As we have heard, within months, seven chief press officers left their post—I think that it has now risen to 10—causing much concern in the civil service and to the then head of the civil service, Sir Robin Butler. Although the Mountfield report has promised to maintain a politically impartial Government information service, the key role given to Alastair Campbell and the introduction of special advisers into the new strategic communications unit that co-ordinates presentation of Government policy has inevitably led to further accusations of the politicisation of the information service and to tension within Whitehall. However, that is not the only tension in the system.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: I will make the point and then I will give way.

To understand the fuller picture and the other tensions that culminated in Charlie Whelan's resignation, one needs to know a little about today's Labour party. Perhaps the easiest and shortest way of doing that is by referring to the African tribal system and to the Tutsi and the Hutu. There may be some important philosophical differences dividing those two tribes, but all we really need to know is that they do not like each other.

Similarly, there are tribes within the Government. However, the divisions within new Labour have less to do with policy and more to do with past betrayals, failed power struggles, opportunistic alliances and disappointed personal ambitions. In other words, as we were reminded over the weekend, they do not like each other.

To counterbalance the key role that Alastair Campbell had at No. 10 Downing street, Charlie Whelan was brought in by the Chancellor at No. 11. Therefore, far from having a unified service giving a coherent Government message, the introduction of politically committed press officers accentuated and widened the fault-line running down the middle of the Government.

The new press officers are often more concerned with the standing of their Ministers in the popularity stakes

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than in the presentation of their Department's policy. As *The Daily Telegraph* rather unkindly said, on 6 January, of Charlie Whelan:

"I doubt if he knows the difference between M1, M2 and the M25."

The future of those press officers depends on patronage from their Minister and the success of that Minister's political future. That relationship creates a crucial distinction between the role of those officers and the previous practice of the civil service, and explains part of the reasons for the difficulties in which the Government found themselves over the Christmas recess.

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman has made that allegation more than once, but has not produced a single shred of evidence to substantiate it. He has read the allegation in a newspaper and is simply repeating it in the House. He cannot substantiate it.

Sir George Young: I shall make the point by referring to Romola Christopherson's remarks in *The Sunday Times—[Interruption.]* I hope that Labour Members will not denigrate a civil servant who has served the Labour party well for the past 18 months. She said:

"But in the Treasury, Mr. Whelan was spinning out of control. Knocking chunks off departments and Ministers, working Mr. Brown up and others over, he raised hackles and pints."

Indeed, the more one reads about Mr. Whelan, the odder it seems that he was ever allowed in the Treasury in the first place.

The tensions that I have mentioned have, in recent weeks, led to much distress for the Government, over which I shed few tears. However, there have been some worrying developments, both for civil servants and for news management. I think that the House needs to be concerned with those developments.

Jill Rutter, a former head of the Treasury press office, made the point well at a meeting of the Social Market Foundation. She said:

"Once the news is out—in a speech or an official release—it is a free good. But unreleased information is a valuable commodity. The genius of the government's news managers is to recognise and exploit that fact and use it to create a long-term dependence relationship."

She went on to warn that we could be turning the Government information service into a

"powerful machine to secure the permanent advantages of incumbency."

Mr. Bercow: While my right hon. Friend is dealing with that important point, will he recall that the current Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, in his earlier capacity as Minister for School Standards, shamefully sought to bully a career information officer, Mr. Jonathan Haslam, into putting more political spin into a press release on education? When Mr. Haslam refused to comply with the instruction, the right hon. Gentleman reported him to the permanent secretary. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Haslam left the public service. Is that not a shameful state of affairs?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend refers to the incident in which the official, who left his post shortly after the incident occurred, was said to have insisted that it was a party political matter with which civil servants should not have become involved. It is a good example of some of the changes that have occurred.

I should say, as an aside, that the Labour party's disciplined and centralised approach to policy announcements is in marked contrast to the Liberal Democrats's approach. The Liberal Democrats' more devolved and relaxed style permits a more flexible approach to policy, readily adaptable to an urban or a rural environment. If I may say so, I prefer the third way that has been adopted by the Conservative party.

Jill Rutter's warning, which I have quoted, should concern all hon. Members. The use of the ownership of a valuable commodity to secure favourable coverage in the press—and, conversely, withholding information, which is the raw material of a journalist, from those who are less co-operative—is a dangerous development. That concern was shared by the Select Committee on Public Administration. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) on that Select Committee. Although a number of amendments put forward by Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were voted down by the Labour majority, many of the recommendations that were carried were aimed at clarifying the distinction between effective presentation of Government policy and party political advocacy.

Another worrying development was the production last July of the Government's annual report. All references to bad news were airbrushed out and it contained a number of political aspirations better located in an election manifesto.

We have also seen a tendency to recycle information. We all approve of the proposition that 65 per cent. of new houses should be built on recycled land, but we now have a policy that 65 per cent. of all press notices should be recycled news. On Monday, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced that £55 million was to be spent on teaching more maths. The press release was headlined, "Times tables key in £55 million numeracy drive". The money turned out to be a close relation of the £60 million announced for the same purpose back on 8 July under the heading, "£60 million boost makes maths count". Sadly, £5 million had been lost on the journey.

The Government amendment shows no recognition of the important issues raised in the debate and by serious political commentators on the civil service. The Minister's speech also lacked any recognition of those points. The more that one reads about the Government, the more that one asks how collective government can work with such a poisonous cocktail of warring personalities jockeying for position under the Prime Minister. The Government's reaction to the crisis has been a counter-offensive featuring speeches. The Chancellor's keynote speech on Monday was described by *The Guardian* yesterday as "humourless, repetitive and earnest" and its message as

"nothing if not familiar in its content and its now unchallengeable banality."

Hon. Members on both sides want a more positive response. In the words of *The Scotsman* on 5 January:

"It is time for Mr. Blair to put this wretched period behind him and replace the fetish for style with some radical substance."

That is a difficult challenge for a Government whose programme, lacking a theme or any philosophical continuity, is merely a rag-bag of items derived from focus groups.

What is happening is bad not just for the Government, but for the House of Commons and for democracy. Despite regular warnings from Madam Speaker, many Government announcements are so comprehensively trailed that telling Parliament is an afterthought. Journalists get more information earlier than Parliament does. Proper scrutiny is becoming more difficult. That adds to the sidelining of Parliament, something that concerns hon. Members on both sides.

Mr. Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington, East): The right hon. Gentleman seeks objectivity from Prime Minister's press secretaries. Does he believe that the comments of Sir Bernard Ingham, a previous Prime Minister's press secretary who referred to John Biffen as "semi-detached" and Francis Pym as "Mona Lott", were conducive to good Cabinet government?

Sir George Young: Sir Bernard Ingham is well able to defend himself. He was a civil servant and rigidly defined his role as never crossing the boundary between the civil service and party politics. Alastair Campbell is not a civil servant; he is a special adviser. That is the key difference.

Dr. Jack Cunningham *rose—*

Sir George Young: I am not giving way. I have given way once. I have given way lots of times.

Dr. Cunningham *rose—*

Sir George Young: No, I am not giving way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. You all have to give way to me. It is clear that the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) is not giving way.

Sir George Young: A number of hon. Members want to speak and I have given way several times.

Alastair Campbell is a special adviser. Despite many warnings from Madam Speaker, the Government have adopted a dismissive approach to the rights of Parliament. In the words of *The Times*:

"This Government has played fast and loose with the principle of Parliamentary scrutiny and thus the right of the people's elected representatives to check the powerful, in an effort to shape the media agenda."

The chickens are coming home to roost. I can do no better than end with a perceptive quotation made by Matthew Parris six months ago:

"This world and these men"—

he was referring to the spin doctors—

"will be the downfall of Mr. Blair. These are not the fire-fighters, they are the fire and they will burn him."

4.49 pm

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I very much welcome this debate, and I am delighted that the Liberal Democrats have chosen this issue for discussion this afternoon. I only regret that we have not touched on the big questions that are posed by information not only to our democracy, but to our commerce and industry. I regret that the Liberal Democrats have emphasised the minutiae and left the big picture. I would like to develop some of the big ideas as well.

It seemed to me that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), the official Opposition spokesman, built his speech on fanciful notions and false presumptions, and I will pick up on some of those points as I go along.

It is clear to me that information is power. Perhaps it is because I am old Labour, but I can recollect all the trade union banners of old which showed that the point that education and information are power was recognised by those pioneers. It is as true today as it was then. Information poses a challenge to us as members of the legislature in terms of how we access power. I shall return to this matter in discussing the White Paper on the right to know and the freedom of information Bill. Information is critical to the struggle that goes on under all Administrations between the legislature and the Executive, and that is right and healthy.

The other aspect of the debate is the relationship between the Government and the citizen. With many more outlets to dispense and disseminate information, it is critical that the citizen have access to information. I would argue, and the Government recognise, that information is a critical part of the democratic process. It should not be a bolt-on aspect, but an intrinsic part of the democratic process. The Labour party recognised that in opposition, and we tried to put it in practice from day one in government. It is ironic that information technology allows an increasing amount of information to be disseminated, and it is through IT that we need to tackle the matter.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the special Order in Council concerning Alastair Campbell, and the role of the Government at that time. We took the decision for the very reason that the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire outlined when he cited Sir Bernard Ingham as an independent career civil servant. He was a career civil servant, but nobody could challenge his instinctive feel for what the then Prime Minister was thinking. He pulled no punches. I do not grumble about that—that is the job of a good press officer to the Prime Minister.

With that in mind, we felt it important that, to ensure the political integrity and neutrality of the career civil servant, we should have the Order in Council, and that we should make this special exception for Alastair Campbell—as the Prime Minister's press officer—to be a civil servant as a special adviser. He is a civil servant, but he is not a career civil servant. We felt that that was the best and most transparent approach.

Mr. Tyrie: Does not the right hon. Gentleman grasp that there is a fundamental difference between the two cases? Sir Bernard Ingham never transgressed into party politics. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It is important that Labour Members read the evidence. He was a former Labour supporter—a Labour candidate, as it happens.

The fundamental difference is that Alastair Campbell attends Labour party conferences. Sir Bernard Ingham never attended Conservative party conferences. The Prime Minister himself said that his press secretary does a good job of attacking the Conservative party. The attribution of

[Mr. Tyrie]

such remarks to Sir Bernard Ingham would be absurd. There is thus a fundamental difference between the two cases.

Dr. Clark: There is indeed a fundamental difference. It is that we in government made it quite clear where Alastair Campbell stood and where he came from. There is no misunderstanding. To try to spin the argument that Sir Bernard Ingham did not transgress into party politics is futile and laughable.

We felt that it was right to abandon the charade, which is what we did. Even then, we took the matter forward. We set up the Mountfield committee. May I say as an aside how delighted I was to see Robin Mountfield get the KCB in the new year's honours? It was well deserved. The committee produced proposals to ensure the political integrity of the Government Information and Communications Service. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, made clear, that report is available in the Library of the House. The monitoring report is also available in the Library and I urge hon. Members to look at them both.

We are at a stage in our history when the concept of representative democracy is being debated and challenged, and must be changed. The way that we use information is a critical aspect of that. I would argue that the freedom of information legislation is crucial.

I empathise with a great deal of the motion moved by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on freedom of information. I acknowledge, and am grateful for, the support that I received from those on the Liberal Benches in our campaign for that.

There is agreement across the House on the matter. I was disappointed that it was not in the Queen's Speech, but I was reassured this afternoon by my right hon. Friend the Minister telling us that good progress was being made on the draft Bill. Even if he were present—I understand why he is not—he could not give a commitment that it would be in next year's Queen's Speech, but from what he said, it would be amazing and the House would be astounded if that Bill did not appear then. That is extremely encouraging.

Let us be bold when we introduce the Bill. Something struck me over the Christmas recess as I watched the television reports about the release of Government records under the 30-year rule. We heard Lord Callaghan discussing the Race Relations Act 1968. He said that one of the mistakes that he made when that legislation was enacted was to listen too attentively to soundings and views from the Police Federation about excluding the police.

I do not want to do anything, and the Government should not do anything, that inhibits the catching of criminals and the pursuing of prosecutions. Nobody wants that. However, we must not repeat the mistake with freedom of information that we made with the Race Relations Act.

Mr. Baker: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, under freedom of information legislation, the security services should be subject to the test of substantial harm, rather than being excluded entirely?

Dr. Clark: I should prefer to wait and see the draft Bill. We have rehearsed all the arguments in the past.

We do not have to wait for a freedom of information Act before we make more information freely available. That was a message that I kept hammering home to my former Cabinet colleagues, and I was encouraged by their response. Under this Government, much more information has been made available to citizens and to Members of Parliament. We have seen the Government moving slowly into the IT age. We have seen also increasing use being made of the internet by government and by Members. That must be good. A good example of use of the internet and disseminating Government information arose from the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on the Yemen issue on Monday. An Opposition Member said that travel agents and people travelling abroad often use the internet to obtain the latest Foreign Office advice on whether it is safe to go abroad. That is a good use of Government information.

There is, however, a down side. I offer this message to civil servants: it is critical that Government websites be kept up to date. I was appalled at times by the Cabinet website when I was in charge of it. As a result, we appointed a webmaster to ensure that the websites were up to date; otherwise, everything depended on a civil servant having a quiet Friday afternoon, when it might be raining, to update a website. That is not good enough.

As soon as White Papers are published, we have seen the Government putting the information on the internet. That is the right way forward. I was amused when we were wrestling with the problem of the millennium bug, way back 15 months ago. I had written to all Government Departments asking about their plans. I had decided that I would publish those detailed plans as we received them and make them available on the internet. I called in a number of journalists to brief them. They were suspicious, as always. In effect, they said, "Well, you are just telling us this, you are just telling us that."

I said, "I will give you the whole lot." I gave them 1,200 pages each on which were set out the plans. They wrote nothing about the millennium bug. Certainly there was no criticism. There is a message and a moral in that. We have a culture of secrecy and, because of that culture, people become far too suspicious. They have a bit of information and therefore, as Jill Rutter says, they feel that there are nine tenths or eight ninths of it still under the water, and they want to get hold of it. If we are co-operative in releasing information, we shall be able to communicate much better with the citizens of this country.

An important example of providing information is trying to find new ways of extending democracy. I think especially of the people's panel, which I considered to be an underrated experiment in government. There would be a legitimate complaint against us if we did not publish all the information that the panel produces. If we failed to do so, the information would remain the preserve of the Government, and that would not be healthy. That is why we took the decision to publish all the information produced by the people's panel.

I shall bring my remarks to an end by expressing a few thoughts about the White Paper and making a few points about background information. There is much raw material or information held by government and other public bodies that is kept secret unnecessarily. It is incumbent on Governments to produce that raw information. It may sometimes be produced after the decision has been made but it is still useful. I was pleased

that, a few weeks after we produced the White Paper, we produced also, for the first time, all the background information and raw data upon which the White Paper had been constructed. There should be much more of that sort of activity.

To the Government's credit, there was a move to have a national statistical service. That was a step in the right direction, which removed from the political arena the debate, discussions and slanging matches that went on in the past.

I wonder whether the Government could be a little more proactive in the release of Government statistics. Often, statistics get treated, and they are 12 months out of date. It would be helpful to our country, our industry, our commerce and our democracy if statistics were available in raw fashion much sooner. While the Government's statisticians are still working on the data, independent and business statisticians could also be using them to the advantage of the country.

We are moving not only into a new millennium, but into a new age. We are moving from the age of the industrial society towards a new information society. That gives all sorts of opportunities for more information to be made available to citizens. It will allow us to rebuild the relationship with our citizens. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, debating the Queen's Speech in November, said that Britain had a unique opportunity to take advantage of the English language, the foremost spoken language in the world.

We shall go through many upheavals as we move into a new society, and access to information is critical. Just to show how on-message I am, let me once again quote the Prime Minister who, in arguing for a freedom of information Bill, said:

"It will signal a new relationship between government and people: a relationship which sees the public as legitimate stakeholders in the running of the country and sees election to serve the public as being given on trust."

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): I served on the Select Committee that considered freedom of information before the proposals were produced. We travelled around the world, to Canada and Sweden, which have had freedom of information for many years. Everywhere we went, the proposals were given accolades as being far reaching and advanced. Does my right hon. Friend believe that the Bill will come out in the form it would have taken when he was in charge of it, or will it be watered down?

Dr. Clark: I hope that the Bill will not be watered down. I have already urged my right hon. and hon. Friends to be bold. I accept the sentiment behind what my hon. Friend has said in one sense: the information age offers a great many challenges, but it offers many opportunities too. I believe that, if we do the right thing, we can move from being one of the most secretive societies in the western world to being one of the most open. If we do, we shall re-engage with our citizens and we shall help commerce and industry. I passionately believe that we shall also start to rebuild trust in our democratic process.

5.8 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I shall concentrate on only one aspect of this wide-ranging debate. Labour's changes, although they appear to be incremental, are in fact fundamentally altering the relationship between the civil service and politicians. That process has been occurring for a long time, but has accelerated during the past 18 months. I can illustrate that point with figures for the large number of outside advisers appointed to Whitehall. More than 60 were appointed immediately after the election, and now the number is more than 80. There are about 20 at 10 Downing street at a cost of more than £1 million a year.

A suitable figure for comparison is the number of advisers appointed under Margaret Thatcher's Government on the last occasion on which there was a change of Administration. That Government appointed seven advisers, compared with 60 in 1998. There is always a ratchet effect: the Government began with 60 and are up to 80 after just 18 months; the previous Government's number rose from seven to 35 over 18 years.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Perhaps it would serve the hon. Gentleman's purpose if he got his facts right. It is not 80, but 70, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office stated earlier.

Mr. Tyrie: I will check that figure, but, when I added them up, I got well above 70. If the hon. Gentleman is correct, 60 to 70 is an increase of 10, which is a sharp increase in 18 months—between 15 and 17 per cent.

The doubling since the election represents a fundamental shift in the way in which Whitehall operates. If those advisers are in key positions close to Ministers, it means that the way in which decisions are taken, and the scope for officials to get advice to Ministers, has been altered. The balance of power in Whitehall Departments has altered, and that should not be underestimated.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office made a chilling comparison between the numbers of civil servants and of advisers, as though there should be some sort of rough balance between them, or the numbers could be considered comparable. The key figure is how many people a Minister has in his close entourage. Are we developing a French-style cabinet system?

The Labour Government have also altered the way in which we are governed by introducing Orders in Council to enable them to appoint outsiders to key posts hitherto held by civil servants. The Prime Minister's principal private secretary, Jonathan Powell, is one, although he travels under the title of chief of staff. Alastair Campbell, the chief press secretary, is another.

I do not object in principle to the introduction of all those outsiders into Whitehall—it may be a good thing and perhaps Whitehall needs them—but I object to the impression being given that nothing has changed and that we are carrying on just as before. That is complete nonsense, because something fundamental is happening.

With the Government's emphasis on media handling ahead of policy, it is hardly surprising that the Government Information and Communications Service is one of the areas in which those effects have been felt most. In several cases, Labour advisers were brought in explicitly to do press jobs, which were previously carried out by line civil servants; Alastair Campbell is an example. In other cases, that happens unofficially; Charlie Whelan is a case in point and, of course, Jill Rutter had to leave because she apparently felt that her position in the Treasury was untenable—she has gone to the

[Mr. Tyrie]

private sector. In other cases, the selection procedure for replacing press officers seems too often to throw up Labour sympathisers who were working in the media beforehand.

Little public attention has been brought to bear on the way in which Whitehall is changing because it is not a matter in which the public are particularly interested. They have focused on the froth and the battles between senior Labour Ministers, which led to the resignation of one Minister, who is leaving the Chamber as I speak.

Because of the changes in the GCIS, which people I knew who worked there discussed with me, I decided to raise the issue in the Select Committee on Public Administration on which I served. In autumn 1997, I asked whether we could launch an inquiry into the information service and subsequently, in the following spring, wrote a letter to the Chairman of the Select Committee. I was delighted when the Committee went ahead with that inquiry. It unearthed several things that just will not do.

First, it must be wrong for anyone whose salary is paid by the taxpayer to engage explicitly in party political activities. Alastair Campbell is paid more than £90,000 a year—perhaps the Minister will give me the exact figure—from the Exchequer. He should not be spending his time attacking the Conservative party, but that is exactly what the Prime Minister brazenly said at the Dispatch Box that he is doing and that it is his job to do.

When I asked the Cabinet Secretary when he came before the Select Committee if he agreed that that was wrong, he wriggled a little. Amusingly, when I pressed him a little more, he took up the customary, but painful, position that most senior officials take on such occasions and sat on the fence. In his evidence, he ended up distinguishing between attacking the Opposition, which was almost okay, and attacking them with bricks and bottles, which he felt was not.

Alastair Campbell's contract clearly states that he should not take part in national political activity. Schedule 1, part 2 of his contract says:

"Special advisers must not take part in national political activities"

nor must they

"engage in national political controversy."

However, Sir Richard Wilson, the Cabinet Secretary, was unable to tell the Select Committee whether what the Prime Minister described as attacking the Conservative party constituted party political activity. I should have thought that it was pretty clear. In their evidence, both he and Alastair Campbell suggested that acting as a spokesman at the Labour party conference did not constitute party political activity or being a spokesman for the Labour party. That is merely Sir Humphrey double-speak.

I readily acknowledge that there has been some awkwardness about some of the activities that special advisers have been asked to undertake, under both Conservative and Labour Administrations, because they are funded by the taxpayer but are involved in activities that may be close to the line. However, Labour's decision to politicise Whitehall and to use taxpayers' funds for party political purposes on a large scale takes us down a road that will change the style of our government. It will take us away from a politically neutral civil service, towards an American system of government.

A second issue is that of enforceability of contracts. Special advisers who worked under the previous Government were sometimes at the edges of what might be considered acceptable, but in my experience that was all the subject of a typically British compromise and there were negotiations over many of the issues. As far as I know, the issue of whether any adviser came close to breaching his contract never arose. No adviser ever got to the point at which his permanent secretary felt the need to speak to him. Plainly, Labour's special advisers are engaging in national party political activity on a pretty big scale. Many people know that—everyone in the Press Gallery, for example—and they know that, in doing so, they are clearly in breach of their contracts.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Gentleman asks why, under the previous Government, there was no threat of a special adviser being removed because of breach of contract. Is that not because, under that Government, no one knew the terms of reference for such advisers? It is only since we established a model contract for them that everyone has understood their role.

Mr. Tyrie: Is the Minister suggesting that Labour thought that special advisers were appointed exclusively to do party political work paid for by the taxpayer and that the incoming Government were shocked to discover when they brought in their own advisers that there was some limit to what they could do? Of course he is not. The Labour party knew very well that special advisers should not engage in party political activity. If they had been doing so, permanent secretaries would have done something about it.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell *rose—*

Mr. Tyrie: I should like to make some progress before giving way, although I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is also a member of the Public Administration Committee.

Who will enforce those contracts? When I asked the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Richard Wilson, who was responsible for enforcing a contract that had clearly been breached, he could not offer me any comfort and nor could his predecessor, Sir Robin Butler, to whom I had put the same question. It seems that it is the job of the permanent secretary in a Department to spot a breach, but he has no power to enforce the contract. Although the special adviser's contract is with the departmental head, the permanent secretary cannot do anything about it. He cannot sack an adviser, because he did not appoint him or her; the adviser is appointed by his Secretary of State. We are in the crazy position—something has to be done about this—where special advisers can do no more than breach their contracts, but the permanent secretary can merely have a word about it with his Minister and, perhaps, the Cabinet Secretary and there the matter has to end.

Mr. Campbell: If I remember correctly, the permanent secretary's evidence to the Committee was that he had no problem with Alastair Campbell and that he had not breached the rules. I think that the hon. Gentleman was there when that was said.

Mr. Tyrie: I was certainly there. It is unimaginable that the Cabinet Secretary would have said that there had been

a clear breach of rules but that we should not worry because he was not going to do anything about it. An elementary knowledge of these things—the hon. Gentleman heard me say this earlier—shows that the first place that a Cabinet Secretary will put himself when he is under pressure is on the fence. If one that looks at his evidence, one sees that that is exactly where he was sitting.

Several straightforward things can and should be done to stop this attack—whether it is intended or unintended is irrelevant—on Whitehall impartiality, and put matters back on a sustainable basis. First, people such as Alastair Campbell who are expected to do overtly party political work should be paid from party political funds. Their salaries should not be paid by taxpayers. It is not acceptable to expect taxpayers to fund Alastair Campbell's attacks on the Conservative party. That is an unacceptable abuse of Government money. Likewise, the strategic communications unit should probably be paid for from party funds.

Secondly, I do not believe that there should be any further changes to the civil service Orders in Council to give special advisers the authority to manage other civil servants. That is the key aspect of the changes. All civil servants, without exception, should be appointed in the normal way on the basis of fair and open competition. Thirdly, permanent secretaries should be made explicitly responsible for enforcement of special advisers' compliance with their contracts.

Those are sensible suggestions, three of which were tabled as amendments to the Select Committee report, to which, in the end, I had to write a minority report. I regret that, and the fact that a partisan element crept into the Committee's work. I strongly support the work of Select Committees in principle. I do not believe that my suggestions, which constituted three of the four amendments that I tabled, are over the top, or that they are partisan. They would help to preserve the impartiality of the civil service and reassure taxpayers that their money is not misappropriated for party political use.

We are at the first stage of a trip towards the Americanisation of politics, with excessive attention to media handling, big increases in the number of special advisers and a presidential style emanating in so many ways from No. 10. If the House wants to do something about it, we must press the Government to put in place some of the sensible proposals that I have outlined.

5.23 pm

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): In a way, I am grateful to the Liberals for raising these issues, but the material that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) produced in support of his case was pretty thin. It is not unfair to say that, on the Richter scale of saturated fireworks, it was less a damp squib than a soggy sparkler. He constantly referred to newspaper articles written over the past 12 months, which does not in itself mean that he has a case. If the case were to stand up, it should have dealt with subversion of the orthodoxies of how we run government by excessive use of spin doctoring, excessive concentration on presentation and so forth.

The same criticism applies to the speech of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). Hiding behind the skirts of Romola Christopherson does him no credit. Her article in *The Sunday Times* was excellently written. There is no questioning her status as the recently retired doyenne of her profession as a career information civil servant in the Government Information and Communications Service. She showed the undoubted tensions in the service between the old ways of doing things and the new ways brought in by Labour, but the article did not amount to a devastating attack on what Labour are doing; I found it enjoyable reading. It did not describe Alastair Campbell as new Labour's version of Joseph Goebbels or say that we were about to embark on a slippery slope that would lead to the total subversion of normal democratic government. It was simply that she had one way of doing things, which she did brilliantly throughout her career, and that Alastair Campbell does things entirely differently, and is doing them brilliantly in his way.

Sir George Young: I wonder whether that is a fair summary of what Romola Christopherson said. She actually said:

> "So the government sidelines parliament and is heavily into focus groups, road shows, citizens' juries, people's panels . . . Such forms of popular involvement can complement representative democracy but should surely not replace it."

That is a more substantive attack than the hon. Gentleman suggested.

Mr. Morgan: If Romola Christopherson had said that the Government had subverted representative democracy, the right hon. Gentleman would have a case, although he would still be hiding behind her skirts. She also said:

> "So far, so not at all bad".

He should be more balanced in his quotes from Romola Christopherson. I assure him that he will find the quote at the end of the article.

We should concentrate on freedom of information, a subject that the Liberals attempted to weave into the issue of the Government Information and Communications Service. We are at the waiting game stage. We have not seen the draft Bill, but we did a leak, if it was one, in *The Times* yesterday. Under the headline "Straw to weaken code on freedom", there is a reference to what the Government's approach will be. If it is true, I must express my concern about it.

Will the substantial harm test disappear and be replaced by an across-the-board harm test? "Substantial" is a word with a considerable history in civil service memos—a wonderful British civil service word. In this context, it has a much more important meaning. There is a huge difference between denying information to the public on the basis of its release doing any harm and being able to deny its release only on the basis that it will do substantial harm to the state and its interests as listed in the White Paper. If "substantial" disappears from the draft Bill, it is likely to constitute a substantial watering down of the principles in the White Paper published by the Government, with the Prime Minister's name in the forward. That White Paper was a result of the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mr. Clark), who was then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancashire, with powerful support from the Lord Chancellor.

The replacement of the substantial harm test with the much easier harm test would be serious, although I understand that the Government will try to compensate

[Mr. Morgan]

for it in other aspects of the methodology of the Bill. It would enable the Government to deny information on a wider scale. The article in *The Times* yesterday alleged that the Government were considering codes, which would be different for each matter, on national security; law enforcement; personal privacy; commercial confidentiality; the safety of the individual, the public and the environment; information supplied in confidence; and official advice to Ministers. There were to be eight or nine categories, each with a separate code.

The problem with that is that, when the Government came into power in May 1997, they decided not to go for a freedom of information Act in their first 18 months. I think that I am right in saying that one reason for doing that was that they did not want merely to transfer into statute the non-statutory code on access to official information introduced by the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

It is no criticism of the right hon. Gentleman, but I think that it is fair to say that that non-statutory code has been a failure. It has simply not engaged the general public's attention. They simply do not apply for information, because it is only a non-statutory code. Moreover, on the rare occasions when members of the public do ask for information, Departments do not take their requests seriously.

The proof of that is in a press notice issued by the ombudsman, who enforces the code, because he can construe refusal to supply information as maladministration. On 10 December 1998, in his official press release on the latest annual report, he said:

"Too often, departments quote exemptions in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information . . . rather than follow the spirit of the Code and give as much information as they are able."

In the four years of the existence of the non-statutory code on access to Government information, Whitehall is just as secretive as it was before. Its culture has not been changed. Nor has the culture of the citizenry been changed to expect, as happens in Sweden and Canada, to be able to obtain information from the Government unless national security or a similar interest is at stake.

In order to change the culture of Whitehall and the expectations of the citizenry, Labour said that it would introduce an Act of Parliament to enshrine freedom of information in law rather than in a non-statutory code. We sought to change the culture and the expectations on both sides, empowering the citizenry, which was all very laudable.

Labour then said that it would not merely transfer into statute the non-statutory code, but that it wanted to go much further. The problem is that, after two years of going around the houses and responsibility having been transferred to the Home Office, it appears that, if the leak is accurate, we will have a Bill that is almost identical to the one that we would have had had we legislated in June 1997, simply by putting the non-statutory code on access to Government information on a statutory basis. If that is the case, we might as well have done it in year one anyway.

If what is presupposed in the leak in *The Times* yesterday happens, we will have gone around in a circle. I hope that I am wrong, but, if I am right, and if the Bill emerges in a couple of weeks' time in the form predicted in *The Times* yesterday, based on pretty careful information supplied from some Department or other, or some spin doctor, there will be a great battle over the word "substantial" and whether it can be reinserted in the Bill.

There is a great story about the word "substantial" in south Wales. We in Wales are notorious for giving people nicknames. A manager of a tinplate works in Llanelli who came from England and had been to public school in Oxford was warned that he would probably be given a nickname, so he called in the work force and said, "Look, chaps, I am new to the area and I know that you have a great reputation for giving people nicknames. I am English and you are Welsh, so you will probably give me a nickname. I don't object to that, but I don't want one of those Mickey Mouse names. I want you to call me something substantial." From then on, he was known as Dai Substantial.

I hope that, when the Bill is published, we will not have a battle royal over the word "substantial". We want a freedom of information Bill based on the White Paper published by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields, not on the non-statutory code bequeathed to us by the Conservative Government.

5.34 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): It is a pleasure to participate, I hope briefly, in this afternoon's debate, especially in view of the pertinent points made by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). I also listened with great interest to what the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) said about freedom of information, and to the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark).

I reserve my position on freedom of information until I see what the Government publish. There is undoubtedly a need for greater access to information in Britain. Having practised at the Bar, and having frequently encountered problems in obtaining the necessary information for Government work, and on the whole question of public interest immunity, I have not the slightest doubt that successive Governments have been getting themselves into a complete twist on the issue and, as a result, have been holding back on completely innocuous information as part of a knee-jerk reaction of secrecy which we would do well to break down during the coming years. I shall therefore look at the legislation with considerable interest as and when it comes forward.

The question which interested me particularly this afternoon was the way in which the Government have been manipulating or handling information on a daily basis since they took office. I would be the first to accept that all Governments throughout history have manipulated information for their own benefit. It is not something that started in May 1997. Previous Governments, including Conservative Governments, have put the best gloss on factual material in their possession and on their presentation of matters. That is one of the things that politics is all about.

We cannot get away from the fact that there has been a qualitative and quantitative shift since the Government took office in the way in which such information has been handled. That is a feature of the way in which government has been conducted in Britain and it differentiates us from many other democracies, quite apart from those countries which do not enjoy democratic government.

Over the years, the civil service's reputation for impartiality, and the way in which the Government information service has operated, has tended to mean that people have at least felt that they could rely on the factual material being presented to them, and on the fact that there was a clear separation between party political spin and Government activity.

It may well be that that was simply one of the handicaps of Government, rather like the handicap of a prosecutor in court when he has to abide by rules which are more difficult and severe than those of his opponents in terms of ensuring that he does not mislead, and of the way in which material is handled. It is that which the Government have set out to circumvent.

Having spent part of Christmas reading Mr. Philip Gould's autobiography of his long years advising the Labour Government—a revealing and remarkable work—I dare say that, if a political party starts out on the principle that most of the things in which it believes do not appear to be shared by the electorate, and then sets out on a difficult 10-year process of adapting its beliefs to those of the people whom it is trying to convince, it is hardly surprising that, as a result of that process, it ends up with an extremely slick public presentation machine which, in terms of securing electoral advantage, has proved itself to be superb.

The question is whether one is then entitled to translate that into the way in which one operates in government. It is that issue which the Minister must address carefully. There is overwhelming evidence that the Government have simply taken on all the spin doctoring techniques that they had in opposition, which may well have been legitimate there, and treated them as a perfectly legitimate field of operation once in office.

I happen to believe that that is not right. It is all very well to be told that previous Prime Ministers may have had press officers who acted in the same way, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) pointed out, the sheer number of political advisers, and the way in which we have seen them operate during past months, suggests two principal things—first, that the Government are willing to break down the notion of collective responsibility when it comes to the way in which individual advisers set off their political champions, one against the other, and secondly, that, in the area of manipulation, the idea of objective truth reliant solely upon factual information has been jettisoned. That matters to me as an Opposition Member because I do not much like what I see, but it goes beyond merely the Opposition having a grouse about the way in which the Government have decided to conduct their information service.

For example, shortly before Christmas, the Government set out on a foreign policy initiative involving the use of force against Iraq. It enjoyed cross-party support—I certainly supported it. The Government information service produced a number of documents. When people wrote to me expressing disquiet about, for example, whether the targeting of military bases in Iraq was producing results, I sent to them copies of the product produced by the Government information service. I was quite happy to rely on that as being factually objective and true in so far as the intelligence information that backed it up might be. Therefore, I was intrigued to note the number of people who replied to me expressing disbelief at the material that I received on the grounds that they had ceased to believe in the objectivity of the department producing it. That may have been linked, in part, to the fact that the President of the United States was experiencing domestic difficulties, which it is suggested may have led him to distort information and provide reasons for distracting people from his problems. However, I believe that one of the reasons is that Government information, as a source of material on which people can make decisions, has been discredited. The discrediting comes entirely from the way in which the Government's advisers have been operating.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester that it is objectionable for the taxpayer to be paying for people who are simply party political advisers and who are there solely to put a gloss on events to the best advantage of their political masters. Perhaps it will cause problems for political parties, particularly for my own, if we have to continue to dig deep into pockets when the money is not always available.

It is high time we started looking afresh at the way in which the service works. The blurring of the distinction between Government information and political spin is the source of a great many problems and, if it continues unchecked, it will become a real source for evil and for the discrediting of democratic government.

5.43 pm

Mr. Anthony D. Wright (Great Yarmouth): We have travelled a long way in the past 50 years. I have in my hand an extract from a little book about Clement Attlee called "The Man From Limehouse". It purports to describe the first Cabinet meeting of the 1945 Labour Government. It says:

> "At the first meeting of his new Cabinet Attlee said: 'Gentlemen, there are three things against which I must warn you, three things I will not countenance. I want you to heed them carefully.' Then the new Prime Minister recited the three things: '(1) I don't want you ever to be caught talking in the Lobby of the House of Commons. It only leads to making undesirable friends and connections; (2) no loitering or wining and dining in West End restaurants . . . and finally . . . (3) Don't ever let me catch ANY of you talking to Lord Beaverbrook.'"

We have travelled a good way from that to Charlie Whelan. That tells us a good deal about what has happened to political life over that time.

I will not detain the House with another extract, but Attlee was approached about holding press conferences on the model of the American President. He wrote a sharp note back to the person who suggested that saying that it was a substitute for Parliament and that that was what Ministers should do. I am sure that Madam Speaker would like that sort of response.

All Governments want to manage the news. All Governments want journalists, the newspapers and the broadcast media to write and say nice and applauding things about them. I take that to be a truth of politics across all parties. Some will do it more effectively than others. I suspect that one of the reasons for the bile coming from Conservative Members is that it is now being done rather effectively. The professionalism that the Labour party developed in opposition has been transferred to Government and we are having a more co-ordinated approach to Government information than we have ever seen before in this country. In fact, we are seeing the most concerted approach to putting co-ordination at the centre of government than ever before.

[Mr. Anthony D. Wright]

Given that one of the main criticisms of Governments in Britain over the years has been that they are too fragmented and departmentalised, it is not ignoble to try to make them more coherent and effective. The reorganisation, and presentation, of Government are of a piece. The fact that we are doing that in a new and more effective way is part of the reason why people want to comment on it now.

We can look at the evidence. I have to quote the redoubtable Romola Christopherson, partly because I like saying her name, who was an extraordinarily effective press person at the Department of Health. In the much-cited article, she contrasts the ineffectiveness of things before with the effectiveness of things now. She says:

"The Conservative Government had a rather ramshackle co-ordination machine called Cab-E-Net, which never really got effective lift off and the electronic diary was cluttered with minor ministerial flower-arranging engagements."

It is not surprising that, if one takes office in a can-do spirit with the intention of bringing in more co-ordination than before, and if one finds that the information machine is antiquated and in need of reform, one will want to sort it out.

Sir George Young: In the interests of balance, will the hon. Gentleman read out what Romola Christopherson said about Charlie Whelan so that we can see how that chimes in with his argument about the new system being better than the old?

Mr. Wright: In the interest of a different sort of balance—the Romola Christopherson article is very long, but we can swap quotations if that is what the right hon. Gentleman wants—I can provide another from a different source. It is from an article that appeared in the *New Statesman* in June last year. It is written by Ivor Gaber who is a former BBC journalist, a former producer for BBC radio and who has worked at Channel 4 and is now professor of broadcast journalism at Goldsmiths' college in the university of London. The article is based on his experience as a broadcaster working at Westminster and it goes on to be critical about news management under the present Government. A prelude to that part of the article states:

"Prior to May 1997 I found that, with occasional exceptions, Whitehall press officers were incompetent, ignorant, lazy and frequently downright rude. Almost invariably, they lacked journalistic or public relations backgrounds and seemed to see their jobs as largely to protect their Ministers from the unwelcome intrusions of the media rather than to act as intermediaries."

So, on the evidence from entirely reputable sources, there is no doubt that there was a problem with the way in which the Government information service worked. There is nothing improper in seeking to modernise it as part of the general attempt to modernise the Government and to bring about more co-ordination. Indeed, as was said during the debate after the Mountfield report, that view was supported within the civil service and was not just a view that came in with politicians from outside.

If that is true, it is also true that the process carries dangers with it. The professionalisation of news management has been the trend since that Attlee quote of 50 years ago. It is happening for all the reasons that have been mentioned, some technological, some political and many others. The more we have that professionalisation, the more we will have to balance that all the time against those mechanisms which ensure that information is accessible and that accountability is effective.

One cannot do anything about politicians wanting to control the news. All that we can do is make sure that we put in place other mechanisms to ensure that it is balanced so that the integrity of the democratic process is maintained. Without developing any of the arguments, I will simply say that that is why it is important to maintain a robust Parliament. Parliament is an important ingredient in enforcing accountability. It is crucial that relationships of dependency do not develop between Departments, spinners and journalists. If we allow that to happen, we break the free flow of information and begin to destroy what should be a free press and media.

It is important to protect civil servants so that they are never asked to do things that they believe are politically improper. It is crucial that we have robust media who do not become the slaves of spin but who assert their integrity in all the ways that they should. There are worrying signs on that front. The media want to do easier things. It is much easier to follow stories about alleged personal rivalries between Cabinet Ministers than to explore policy on pensions, transport or the euro. Journalists on the whole do not understand those things, but they do understand personal rivalries.

We are in a political environment in which, in a sense, there is nothing much happening. The Government have a huge majority. The Opposition are non-existent. We have a Government who are closer, as we have just heard, to the opinions of people than a Government have ever been in living memory. There is not much moving politically so all that journalists can do is seek out the trivia and tittle-tattle. That is what they are doing.

When the media start to do things such as stopping "News at Ten" or stopping broadcasting proceedings in Parliament, the democratic process is eroded and the information flows between politicians and the citizenry is undermined. So the media have a responsibility, too. Many balancing or rebalancing forces have to be put in place. One that has not been mentioned but is pivotal to all this is the Cabinet. The Cabinet is supposed to be the key co-ordinating mechanism in our system.

Cabinets go through particular life cycles. No sooner does someone announce the death of Cabinet government than it is revived. I suspect that we are on the eve of one of its periodic revivals. That is a good thing. Unless we have effective Cabinet government, we shall not have effective co-ordination at the centre and we shall not in turn be able to enforce the collective accountability that the House and people outside want to see.

Democracy requires debate and argument. It does not require spin. Spin has been elevated because we are frightened of debate and argument. I do not say that in any narrow sense. The political environment is moving towards one in which the media are interested, not in the exchange of views on issues, but in identifying alleged splits between colleagues. That in turn makes the news. Parties in turn know that they will be punished if those splits are perceived to exist. So parties want as far as they can to close down open argument and debate and a substitution necessarily takes place. The spin people

emerge as the substitutes. I am afraid that that devalues the process and eventually the spin people tie themselves up in their own intricate spinneries.

Parliament and the media have to reclaim the ability to engage in proper, grown-up political debate across parties and within parties on issues that matter. That is the most effective thing that we can do to banish the spin merchants to the very edges of politics where they belong.

I am the chair on the Labour side of the Campaign for Freedom of Information. Many hon. Members who have taken part in the debate today have talked about that campaign and have been involved in the argument for a long time. I will not discuss it at length except to say that, when the dust settles, when we have had our arguments about whether the draft Bill is different from the White Paper, when the Select Committee has had a chance to examine it and when there has been outside debate on it—we shall have arguments along the way no doubt—the end of the story will be that this Parliament has introduced a freedom of information Act. That is something that has eluded all previous Parliaments since the war. I suspect that, when people come to write the record of what happened to information in this Parliament, the fact that this Parliament introduced such a Bill will count as the truly significant act.

5.56 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I hope very much that we shall have a freedom of information Act in this Parliament and, more to the point, one with teeth. I fear that, if the Home Secretary has his way—if we are to believe leaks in the newspapers—we will have a watered-down Act. I agree with the points made by the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan). I shall deal with the forthcoming Bill in a few moments.

There is an element of déjà vu about this speech. I remember coming here on Friday 24 April last year, when there was a packed Press Gallery and an empty House, to make a number of points about the Prime Minister's press office. I could save hon. Members a lot of time by simply asking them to read the speech that I made then. The points that I made then were an attempt to be helpful and they are as valid today as they were on that occasion.

I agree with the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) that the spin department of the Labour party was effective before the last election. It was exceedingly effective in getting its message across and it has been effective for most of the Government's time in office so far. That presents its own problem. A Government must recognise that it is not appropriate to put their foot flat on the floor of their Jaguar, or any other car that they might happen to have, and drive at maximum speed. They have to let up. They cannot pull all the levers of government as far as they will go and simply say, "Those levers are there for us to pull and we can do what we want." The Government must exercise some self-restraint but they have not done so in their time in office so far.

I hope that I am not being too unparliamentary if I say that we had a supercilious speech from the Minister for the Cabinet Office. He was dismissive of the serious points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and, indeed, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). The Government have to ask themselves what was the cause of the carnage that occurred over the Christmas period. There is no point in blaming another party, the media or external forces, whether it be the Americans or someone else. They have to ask themselves what was their part in that. They put in train a chain of events that led inexorably to that crisis. I do not suppose that they will admit that today in the Chamber. They will not say, "We got it wrong," but I hope that, behind the scenes, they are doing some work to change the reasons for that chain of events. It is not in the country's interest, let alone the Government's interest, for those events to be repeated.

The Labour party's spin department overreached itself and it began to believe that it was omnipotent, that it had close contact with Rupert Murdoch, and that, if its staff ate in the right restaurants, met the right people, talked down the right telephones and did this or that deal, it would all be all right. One should never trust the press. That was a foolish mistake for master spinners to make. My conclusion about spinners is that they are good at getting rid of the opposition, but that, when it comes to batting oneself, they are perhaps best kept well down the batting order because they cannot be relied upon to deliver the goods. Will the spin machine be controlled? I very much hope so.

One problem highlighted by hon. Members from all parties is the blurring of the edge between the party machine and the Government machine. I do not pretend that that is anything new; as the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) said, that has been the practice of all Governments throughout the ages—almost since time began in this House. This Government are rather better at it, but the practice is becoming more prominent.

There is a difference between Government and party interests. Bernard Ingham stepped over the line, and no one could reasonably defend his actions as independent, just as no one could defend those of Alastair Campbell. On a number of occasions, I have become very worried about that line being walked over. At Question Time on April fools' day, the Prime Minister defended Mr. Campbell, saying:

> "There is one reason why the Opposition attack the press spokesman: he does an effective job of attacking the Conservative party."—[*Official Report*, 1 April 1998; Vol. 309, c. 1252.]

I am all in favour of attacking the Conservative party, but it is not the job of a civil servant—whether a special adviser or otherwise—to do that. There was no satisfactory explanation of why that statement was made, whether the Prime Minister thinks it was a mistake or whether the Government still endorse it. Will the Parliamentary Secretary tell us directly whether the Government believe that it is the job of Alastair Campbell or Jonathan Powell to attack the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats or anyone else in a partisan way? Or are they neutral civil servants? What is the position in terms of their responsibility for attacking other parties?

As I pointed out when I intervened on my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, the model contract—I of course give the Government credit for placing it in the Library—says that special advisers—that includes Mr. Campbell—must not take part in public controversy. I think that he has failed that test. They "must . . . observe discretion"—he has certainly failed that test—and "express comment with moderation". If one talks to the Lobby journalists, who have Mr. Campbell breathing over their shoulders to tell them what should or should not be in their articles, they would say that he has failed that test.

[Mr. Norman Baker]

Special advisers must also "avoid personal attacks". The former Secretary of State for Social Security could demonstrate that that particular test has been failed. According to that contract

"they should not speak publicly"

for their Minister or their Department.

In answer to the Parliamentary Secretary, I do not have a problem with the contents of the model contract, which is absolutely fine. I have a problem with the way in which it is being applied in particular cases—that is what needs to be examined, not the content of the contract. The contract is merely words on paper, which mean nothing unless they are enforced.

There are other examples of the blurring of the line between Government and party. As the Parliamentary Secretary comes from Liverpool, it is appropriate to draw his attention to an invitation issued by the Liverpool Labour party. It states:

"Visit the House of Commons—Buffet Lunch and Wine. Travel by Luxury Coach, Thursday 14 January. Prize Draw—12 Winners given tour of 10 Downing Street. Cost £40, all proceeds to the Liverpool Labour Forum."

Rather ironically, it continues:

"Fresh Start for Liverpool".

That does not seem to be a fresh start for Liverpool in terms of Labour party organisation.

Having written to the Prime Minister this morning, I was phoned by the *Liverpool Echo* and told that the event had been mysteriously postponed, or possibly cancelled. I am not sure which, but I was pleased to hear that. I should be grateful if the Parliamentary Secretary would dissociate himself from that invitation from Liverpool Labour party; confirm that 10 Downing street is a public building and will not be used for fund-raising events; and ensure that there will be no repetition of such an invitation. He must give that assurance, because this is a serious matter, and I hope that he will respond seriously.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): My hon. Friend makes a telling point. Given that Liberal Democrat Members generally want more codified activity in politics, more written constitutions and so on, does he agree that the Vice-President of the United States has been the subject of legal inquiry for apparent fund-raising, using the White House as his base—a much lesser allegation than the one made by my hon. Friend?

Mr. Baker: The Prime Minister and his colleagues are very close to the American President and perhaps they can learn a lesson from that case.

Part of the answer to such problems is a proper freedom of information Bill—it would eradicate some of the problems that have arisen from the Government during their first 19 months in power. My views—and those expressed by others—are not unique to Members of this House; they are also the views, in some respects, of Madam Speaker. In a television interview last year, from which I quote directly and very carefully, to make sure that it is absolutely correct, she said:

"There are far too many of what I would term apparatchiks who have been accustomed, when a party was in opposition, to want to get the maximum publicity. Now in government, they have to be harnessed a little more."

That is exactly the point that I made to the hon. Member for Cannock Chase: the Government cannot expect to pull all their levers as far they will go on every occasion. It would be wrong to do so.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): The hon. Gentleman referred to codified behaviour in response to an earlier intervention. He will be aware of the scurrilous journal *The Grassroots Campaigner*, which, I understand, is a piece of Liberal Democrat propaganda. A recent issue included an article by the former Liberal Democrat leader in my constituency. He attacked public servants employed by my local council—he and other Liberal Democrats had helped to appoint them—for allegedly giving dodgy advice. If the hon. Gentleman wants codified behaviour, should not he demand an apology to be made to those public servants for that disgraceful attack on their neutrality?

Mr. Baker: I cannot possibly respond to that question in detail, as I have not seen the journal. *The Grassroots Campaigner* is an internal Liberal Democrat document. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to look into the matter, I shall be happy to do so. However, he refers to a document that no one has seen and expects me to agree, or otherwise, with him. That is a ludicrous position to adopt.

I refer to the report of the working group on the Government information service, published under the auspices of the Cabinet Office in November 1997. I refer to paragraph 57 on page 18, headed "Standards Submissions lay-out", which is advice to neutral civil servants about how to go about their work. It advises on

"how any 'bad news' aspect can be damped down."

If it is the function of civil servants to damp down bad news about the Government, they might be very busy in the months ahead.

Mr. Kilfoyle: Not for the first time, I am a little confused by the hon. Gentleman. Does he know of any organisation, even one as idiosyncratic as the Liberal Democrat party, that would put out bad news as a matter of course?

Mr. Baker: I am happy to say that we do not have to put out bad news—there is no bad news about us—and neither should the Government put out bad news. This is not about putting out bad news, but about responding to the bad news that has occurred. If the Labour party wants to use press officers to respond to bad news, it must do so, but it should not use civil servants, who are paid by the state, to damp down its bad news. That is not their function, but the Parliamentary Secretary appears to miss that crucial difference.

As I pointed out, part of the answer to these problems is to have proper information. The Parliamentary Secretary will know that the Government's official position, set out by the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark)—although that position might have changed since he was sacked for no apparent reason—is:

"Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest".—[*Official Report*, 16 December 1997; Vol. 303, c. 78.]

That is a standard reply to questions.

I could occupy a great deal of the House's time by listing questions that have been asked, but have gone unanswered by Ministers. I shall not bother hon. Members with a huge range of them, but shall refer to one from yesterday. I asked the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what matters were discussed at the meetings held between Ministers and Monsanto on 29 June and 15 July 1998. He replied:

"These were private meetings at which matters relevant to both MAFF and Monsanto were discussed."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. *119*.]

That is an illuminating answer: was that Minister really as open as possible with Parliament? Did the answer provide information that Parliament should have? I suggest that it did not. Is "relevant to Monsanto" really a piece of information that I could not have gathered when I tabled my question? No doubt, I thought that they were discussing matters that were not relevant to both parties.

Since when is a meeting between a Government Department and a company involved with agriculture and the environment—in turn, that affects a range of issues—a private meeting? Why cannot we know what went on at that meeting? Hon. Members are here to represent their constituents, so the answer given by the Minister of Agriculture is disgraceful. More to the point, it is completely out of line with the Government's guidance.

I am all in favour of the freedom of information Bill, but it is not yet here. It has been promised, but we have been promised all sorts of things. On 15 July 1997, the Parliamentary Secretary wrote to me explaining why the Government's original commitment to publish a White Paper on freedom of information before the summer recess in 1997 was no longer envisaged. He said that it

"would not be practical"

and went on to say that the Secretary of State for the Home Department

"does not therefore now expect to publish the White Paper before the House rises".

It took a considerably longer time before the White Paper arrived.

When the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) was questioned on this issue on 8 May 1997, shortly after the Government were elected, he said:

"I must disappoint you and say that freedom of information has not been dropped and it will feature in the Queen's Speech."

The problem was that he did not say which Queen's Speech. He simply implied that it would be dealt with early on.

On 8 July 1998, the then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said:

"I intend to publish the draft Bill"—

we still do not have it—

"for pre-legislative discussion before the end of September."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1998; Vol. 315, c. 1055.]

That did not happen either. Again, it was put off.

On 13 July 1998, I asked the Prime Minister whether the Bill would be in the Queen's Speech. He replied:

"We will continue to put the Government's priorities forward in the next session."—[*Official Report*, 21 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. *452*.]

He did not say yes or no, which was hardly surprising. We now have an elusive reply from the Home Secretary, dated 26 October, which talks of a programme of work early in the new year.

I will believe the Bill when it appears because promise after promise has been broken. I think that it will appear; the question is: what will it contain? That was the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff, West. Will it be a serious Bill, containing a test of substantial harm? Will it apply that test to the security services, or will we repeat the mistake made by the former Prime Minister, James Callaghan, and exclude sections of the community from the Bill's remit? Will the Bill be watered down so that it does nothing, or will it be a serious piece of legislation?

The Government need to be a little humble and modest, and accept that things are not perfect. They must take steps to rectify matters. If the Minister responds by saying that everything is fine in the kitchen, it will not be good enough.

6.13 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): As usual, the Liberal Democrats are presenting trivia to the House and avoiding the substantive issues that affect the nation and interest all our constituents. Half an excuse may be that they are not the official Opposition. The official Opposition are going through a schism with which Labour Members are familiar—we have had our problems in the past—and that is causing them to be such an ineffective Opposition that the media have nothing to get their teeth into except the trivia on to which the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) has latched. His entire speech relied on a couple of media sources, and he failed to get to grips with the major issues affecting the governance of this country and the modernisation process that must go ahead.

Conservative Members argued against any change in the process of government. They should reflect on that and understand that that is one reason why the country got in such a mess and why they lost control of their troops.

I shall not dwell on special advisers contracts. I was shocked and surprised that one Liberal Democrat found that the contract for special advisers had been placed in the Library, just as we said it would be. That contract contains matters that needed to be codified.

I make no criticism of the individual concerned. I have a great deal of time for the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) because of his talents as a cricketer, but I remember him contesting the West Bromwich, East seat in the 1992 general election, and then spending the period between 1993 and 1997 in the role of special adviser to the former Foreign Secretary, who was previously Secretary of State for Defence. His style was subtle and low key, and the House knew that he was a special adviser, but to say that his was not a party political role is ludicrous. Many Labour Members knew him at that time. I make no criticism of that—the job undertaken by the special advisers appointed by Cabinet and other Ministers was professional.

Soon after the election, Sir Robin Mountfield, permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office, produced a report on the future direction of the Government Information and Communications Service. Hon. Members engaged in this debate should look carefully at the important recommendations in his report. Modernisation is about changing how we as public servants conduct our business in the best interests of the citizens whom we seek to represent. Government is an extremely complex process and I have no doubt that the GICS continues to provide a politically impartial service to the Government.

[Mr. Andrew Miller]

When Labour were in opposition, the Conservatives regularly argued that we had no business skills and could not run a small or medium company, let alone a major corporation or Great Britain plc. They seem to have missed a substantive point: that every single major successful company in this country has radically shaken up its management and organisational structure in the past 10 to 15 years. That has been the hallmark of the successes that we have seen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said, a substantive argument can be made for moving away from the stovepipe mentality that exists within the structures surrounding public service. Most major companies have gone through that process and, if we are to succeed in getting the best value for money out of the enormously complicated resources needed for the delivery of service to our citizens, that is what we must do.

We should start by looking through the right end of the telescope—from the point of view of the citizen who wants to receive the service—rather than looking at things in accordance with the structures that happen to be there simply because they have been there from the year dot. In a recent speech, the Parliamentary Secretary pointed out that, when constituents come to see us in our surgeries, they do not care whether we are counsellors, citizens advice bureaux, Members of Parliament or Ministers of the Crown. They come to us because they have a problem, and they want that problem to be solved. We should address the structures of government in the process of change, which we must surely undergo, on that premise.

Modernisation has been the hallmark of this Government's activities. We have created a devolved process, starting with Scotland and continuing with Wales, and incorporated the European convention on human rights. A White Paper on modernising the processes of government is promised, and is forecast to have four major themes: strategic policy making; joined-up delivery; dealing with benefits that accrue from the information age; and achieving best value for public services. Those are important, strategic issues with which we need to get on. Their delivery is already under way through the creation, for example, of the social exclusion unit, which seeks to bring together cross-departmental activities.

There are contradictions in the positions adopted by Liberal Democrat Members on freedom of information. The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) does not understand that there are obviously issues of commercial confidentiality involved. I saw the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) shake his head at his remarks. Another Liberal Democrat Member argued that everything should be in the public domain, despite the fact that, clearly, some matters must remain confidential. They criticise the fact that private financial arrangements have entered the public domain, yet, given their literal definition of freedom of information, they should expect such matters to be in the public domain in the first place. There seems to be a double standard in their approach.

Freedom of information is an important strand of modern democracy. It is a highly complex subject, and the House would be making a very bad mistake if it rushed into creating legislation that clearly did not work. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) argued for improved freedom of information. I recognise that there are different views throughout the House on the issue. The Home Secretary has pledged that a Bill will be published. Giving the Home Office responsibility for freedom of information, alongside issues such as human rights and data protection—and eventually, I believe, privacy—was the correct structural move.

I hope that we shall be able to depoliticise all modernisation issues and engender some general support for the fact that they concern the improvement of the delivery of services to all citizens whom we represent, about whose needs the House and the Government should think first. That is what this Government are all about.

6.23 pm

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution to the debate. When I first heard that the Opposition were intending to debate Government information, I was delighted. I thought that it would be an important and opportune moment to discuss practical issues, and some of the key elements of the Government's commitment to constitutional reform and the modernisation and greater openness of government.

Throughout this debate, however, I have been terribly disappointed to hear more from the Opposition about tittle-tattle on media issues and unsubstantiated allegations regarding breaches of the code for special advisers than about what I consider to be the substance of the debate: the importance of Government information and the way in which we use it to empower our citizens. It is very sad that we have spent so much time debating Mr. Alastair Campbell who, unfortunately, is unable to defend himself in the Chamber.

Mr. Kemp: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Moran: Due to lack of time, I shall not, if my hon. Friend will excuse me.

We have spent more time debating Alastair Campbell than we have the important steps that the Government are committed to taking to increase access to information. Reference has, of course, been made to the forthcoming freedom of information Act. We should be welcoming the Government's commitment to wide and extensive consultation on the terms of the Act and the introduction, for the first time, of the opportunity for pre-legislative scrutiny of a major piece of legislation, which will fundamentally and radically affect the lives of every citizen. Instead, the Opposition have querulously attempted to impugn the Government's lack of progress. Should anybody need to be reminded, full consultation and slower legislative progress are better than passing an Act in haste and repenting at leisure. The ghost of the Child Support Agency should be hovering on all our shoulders in that respect.

We should address the fact that the Government are to introduce for the first time—sooner rather than later, we are assured—a radical step forward in our citizens' right to information. We must consider what that means for our constituents. Such access to information is important to human rights and otherwise. If we are truly to empower our citizens, we must also think about how such information can be accessed and used by them. I have

believed in that passionately since my days as a council leader, when I and my colleagues saw that access to, and use of, public information was part of a solution to improving the processes of government and of democracy. Everyone in the House should be concerned about that, given the low turnout in most elections, especially local ones.

To achieve the ambition of truly empowering citizens by giving them information, several issues must be addressed. I am sorry that the Opposition have not mentioned some of them. A right to access to information is important because it allows the provision of better information on services, and improves democratic dialogue and citizen participation. The feeling of having greater information and, therefore, more success in connecting with the decision-making process could demonstrate that there is more to democracy than a periodic vote. If people are given full information, they can properly judge whether Governments are delivering on their promises. That is why this Government consider that access to information is so important.

We must address two important substantive issues on access to information. First, there is a practical problem. It is not good enough for the Government simply to provide information, radical though that step will be. In order truly to empower people, we must ensure that citizens receive the full breadth of information. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take on board concern about whether mechanisms are in place to ensure not just that the Government are able to provide such information, but that agencies at arm's length can provide full and timely proactive information. We must identify and co-ordinate the necessary data across agencies so that the Government can be proactive in their delivery and citizens properly informed. We need one simple computerised access point, using live operational data, accessible to local and central Government, so that action can be taken at the appropriate level. I am simply asking whether we have that yet.

Secondly, Government information should be accessible to all. We must ensure that our citizens do not merely have the information, but can develop the necessary skills to use it, to recognise and evaluate it and to articulate what is needed. It is incumbent on the Government not just to provide information, but to ensure that we have a responsibility to our citizens to enable them to have the skills that are required for the useful and appropriate employment of the information. Not enough attention has been paid to that so far, and I hope that Ministers will consider it now.

I am grateful to Opposition Members for giving us an opportunity to raise the issues that we have discussed; but I am sorry that what they gave us was a rather sad political punch-up on the basis of spurious tittle-tattle, rather than a serious debate on Government information.

6.31 pm

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I am grateful for the chance to say a little in summing up a debate which, in my view, far from being sad, has been interesting and lively. We have been given an interesting insight into the way in which the Government believe that they are handling important issues.

If, as the hon. Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) suggested, all that we have seen over the past few weeks has been tittle-tattle and trivia, I wonder why two Ministers have felt it necessary to resign, and why one of the Government's chief communications experts has stepped down. I cannot but reflect on what was said by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) when he was criticised by the Minister for the Cabinet Office for having dared to quote various remarks about rivalry—remarks that the Minister suggested were unsubstantiated. Surely, that is precisely because such remarks are given to the newspapers and other media on an unattributable basis. If more people put their remarks on the record—as Romola Christopherson did in a very intelligent article to which a number of hon. Members have referred—we could engage in far more open and informed debate on Government information, freedom of information and many other matters that have been touched on today.

Mr. Charlie Whelan is to resign. I wonder whether I am alone in mourning his passing, if only because, if one had the good fortune to time a visit to the Red Lion for a swift pint to coincide with one of his many visits, one was often able to hear a rather more candid and open explanation of Government policy than can sometimes be heard from Ministers at the Dispatch Box. Mr. Whelan is, however, the author of his own undoing in many respects. In his farewell remarks—if such they were—he said that he felt he had to go because he had become the story; but, as I think will be recognised, Mr. Whelan's style of going about his business rather suggested that he was courting recognition and attention.

Another casualty of this affair was one of the authors of what some have called the black arts. Perhaps it would have removed some of the mystique of what those people do if they had been willing to put much more of what they did on the record. It would be a welcome change if Mr. Alastair Campbell conducted his briefings on camera, as is done in the United States and many other parts of the world. That would get rid of some of the so-called tittle-tattle, and would smoke out and substantiate items that we read in the newspapers, which some have sought this afternoon to dismiss as mere rivalries.

Both the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office have made points about the new arrangements. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) stressed that change was needed, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) pointed out that some of the changes that have been made have been to the good—that some new practices are an improvement on the old ones. Both Ministers, however, tried to give the impression that, because there is now a code, because there have been Orders in Council and because a contract has been published, everything is all right. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) said, if all is now hunky-dory because the information has been published and is out in the open, what was the cause of the Christmas carnage? The arrangements may look marvellous in theory, but they are plainly not working in practice.

As the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) pointed out, there is no mechanism for policing all the new arrangements. The permanent secretaries cannot remove those whom they consider to be in breach of the contracts, because they did not appoint them in the first place. That contradiction lies at the heart of the new arrangements. It is not that they are all bad; it is not that there is no role

[Mr. Nick Harvey]

for people who do some of the things that are done. The drawing up of these documents, however, has not produced the clarity and transparency that we expect.

Some of the rivalries are not as trivial as one or two speakers have suggested. We shall be given a chance to read the biography of the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry shortly, but we have already learnt from the pen of the same author that some of the rivalries between No. 10 and No. 11 date back to the occasion when they vied for the leadership. One surmises that all sorts of undertakings must have been given to the present Chancellor of the Exchequer, which caused Mr. Charlie Whelan to observe on one occasion that, in his view, the Chancellor of the Exchequer was the chief executive of the Government and the Prime Minister merely the chairman. I think that some of Mr. Whelan's antics thereafter can be judged in that light.

In truth, the fact that so many members of the Government have had their own private spin doctors waiting to score points over other members of the Government means that there was an accident waiting to happen—and it happened to blow up over Christmas. It should be realised that, underlying the failings of the information system, are deeper political problems that cannot be papered over.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said that nothing could be done about the news management systems, and that what we needed was more accessibility and accountability. The solution, he said, was better parliamentary debate and a return to Cabinet government. I hope that he is right about Cabinet government; perhaps Cabinet meetings, in the new spirit of comradeship, will last longer than the present 20 minutes or so. He is wrong, however, to suggest that nothing can be done about the communications methods that are being used.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed pointed out, one of the techniques used by spin doctors is the withholding of factual information until the media have written the story. It is an old technique. They make sure that they have the headlines that they want, and only in the days that follow do the journalists get their eyes on the facts and realise that they have written a bogus tale. Not many are big enough to acknowledge in their columns that they have been sold a pup, and to revise what they have written in the light of the facts that have subsequently emerged.

We must pay heed to what Madam Speaker has said on several occasions. Hers was one of the quotations from newspapers that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston criticised my right hon. Friend for referring to; I am sure that no one would regard her remarks as trivial. We need to have facts here, on the Floor of the House, so that proper interrogation is possible at the time. We do not want the facts to be buried in thick tomes and looked at afterwards.

The right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) was right to say that the real matter of substance for the future was the introduction of freedom of information legislation. I was somewhat mystified by the comment of the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who suggested that we were not paying tribute to the Government for instituting an inquiry on BSE. Nothing could be further from the truth: we readily pay tribute to the Government for having had the good sense to launch that inquiry. The point that we were trying to make was that, if a proper freedom of information culture already existed, it would not have been necessary to hold such a public inquiry.

I will go further. If, in the course of the whole long, sorry BSE saga, there had been more information in the public domain, it can reasonably be said that some of the more dreadful elements of the disaster would never have happened. The Minister for the Cabinet Office stated that he entirely agreed that the public's best interests would be served by maximising access to information, and that there was a need for greater openness, accountability and involvement with the public. I hope that, when he brings the draft Bill forward shortly, as he says, that will be a yardstick against which the Government's proposals can be favourably measured.

We will have to look closely at some important details. The hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) rightly focused on one of them: the test of harm to the public interest from disclosing information and whether that will have to amount to substantial harm, or simply be an all-encompassing, rather woolly definition of "harm", which could reach just about every nook and cranny that anyone wanted it to. Therefore, the concept of substantial harm is valuable, as indeed would be the laying down of some specific grounds on which any branch of Government could claim that harm was accruing. Specific grounds will be welcome, but we must not at all costs lose the substantial part of the test.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said that, during his professional career, he had seen much inconsequential information withheld simply because of a knee-jerk instinct for secrecy. It is true to say that that has bedevilled the way in which public administration has operated for too long. We must be ambitious in what we do in response to that.

The hon. Member for Luton, South fairly tried to give the Government some credit for the fact that we shall shortly have the innovation of pre-legislative scrutiny of a draft Bill. No one from the Opposition Benches, or probably from anywhere else, would criticise that, but we have had to wait a long time for pre-legislative scrutiny even to begin.

One optimistic Labour Member said that the draft Bill would appear within the next couple of weeks. Let us hope that that is true, and that the claim will be substantiated and the aspiration met, because we have waited too long for the freedom of information legislation to come out. Nagging at the back of many minds, the nasty fear remains that we could end up with the option that was available on 2 May 1997—to put on to a legislative footing the codified arrangements that the previous Government had tried and, indeed, failed to make any sense of.

If, after two years, we have nothing or little more than that, there is no doubt that there will be loud condemnation from the left, right and centre. If it amounts to little more than that, it will absolutely fail the test that was put by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase, who offered the prospect that history might come to judge the legislation as one of the defining actions in the whole of the Parliament. If that is what we are waiting for—legislation of such an epic nature that it will be the defining achievement of the Government during the

Parliament—let us hope that it will prove to have been worth the wait. If it is a damp squib along the lines that have been referred to, there will be much frustration, annoyance and condemnation.

It has been a traumatic few weeks for the Government. They have brought much of the damage on themselves simply through their obsession with presentation. The way in which they have chosen to go about conducting the presentation of their policies and business has, in effect, brewed up trouble for them; they were the authors of their downfall. I hope that they will now be able to see that, for all their efforts to put the new arrangements on to a visible and open footing, they have simply failed.

Chiding remarks have been made about a former head of the Department of Health press office, but when someone such as that comes out and makes those observations, she or he should be taken notice of. She is an expert witness who has seen the whole operation from the inside. She has served Governments of both colours with some distinction and has been noted as an expert in the sector.

Under the current news management regime, there is a danger that the reputation that our civil service and the Government information service—the point was made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield—have gained over the years for impartiality is at risk of being undermined by what is going on.

The right hon. Member for South Shields remarked that we have the opportunity, through introducing legislation, to make ourselves one of the most open societies in the western world instead of one of the most secretive. I hope that that is the ambition of the Government. That is the measure by which we must judge the legislation, when they finally get to bring it out into the open and let us have a look at it.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Peter Kilfoyle): I am pleased to wind up the debate for the Government and to seek the House's agreement to the amendment. Obviously, like all Opposition Members, I am seized by the importance of the issue, given that there are now four members of the official Opposition in the Chamber and only half the Liberal Democrat party has attended one of its precious Opposition days.

I was particularly taken by the fact that, although the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) opened the debate and the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) closed it, in between, only one Liberal Democrat Member wanted to engage in what the Liberal Democrats see as a momentous issue—their allegation that there has been some corruption of the Government information service. The implication was clear.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), for Luton, South (Ms Moran), and for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) for their constructive, if at times slightly critical, contributions. As a Government, we recognise that we can have friends who are critical as long as it is constructive criticism. That is not necessarily what we have heard today.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to put on record, as indeed did the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Government's appreciation of the important work that is performed by the Government Information and Communications Service. It performs its work diligently, effectively and in a way that enables members of all parties to have confidence in its ability to serve Administrations of whatever political party. That is a key issue when we consider the roles of special advisers. We have to have a halfway house between the two roles if we are to maintain confidence in continuity in government. I have no experience whatever of members of the GICS showing anything other than that studied neutrality and commitment to the public service that we extol our civil service for. Rightly, it is held in high regard for that throughout the world.

All Governments have a duty to explain their policies to the public. The criticism that we have received for the emphasis that we place on presentation is misplaced, if for no other reason than that we have made a virtue of presentation. That may upset a few Opposition Members, but we have made no secret of our presentation of Government policies being integral in terms not only of the presentation itself, but of the development of policy.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: My hon. Friend talks, rightly, about the need for accurate presentation of policy. May I give him a contrasting example of poor-quality presentation? Is he aware that the leader of the Liberal Democrats in my borough was forced recently to apologise publicly for a Liberal Democrat "Focus" leaflet that alleged that a vast sum of public money had been wasted by new Labour councillors on office equipment and showers? Having apologised in public for that leaflet, he then attempted in the press to disown responsibility for the leaflet.

Will my hon. Friend, in his usual gentle style, chide the Liberal Democrats in my constituency and, indeed, on the Opposition Benches for their complete failure to ensure that the information that they put out bears some passing resemblance to the truth?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am sure that my hon. Friend will appreciate that the Liberal Democrats do not require chiding from me; I am sure that they will be chided by their own party for being caught with their metaphorical trousers down. One of the virtues of presentation is that, on occasion, we have to rebrand things, often where the product is not moving—where it is not being bought by its potential customers. Perhaps we should rebrand the Liberal Democrats as Heinz, because of the 57 varieties of truth in which they indulge.

I should like to deal with some of the specific points that have been made in the debate. I shall pick, first, on the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, who made a comment about bypassing Parliament. Paragraph 27 of the ministerial code makes it absolutely clear that

> "When Parliament is in session, Ministers will want to bear in mind the desire of Parliament that the most important announcements of Government policy should be made, in the first instance, in Parliament."

We take that commitment seriously. I am not saying that there are not occasions on which, inadvertently, hints and words are dropped. However, the firm intention—and, as far as I am aware, the firm commitment—of all Ministers is to subscribe to the code.

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I would have if the hon. Gentleman had been in the Chamber for most of the debate. I will not give way to him.

If anyone has a complaint about a Minister not applying the code, he or she can raise it with the Speaker.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) asked about the objectivity of special advisers. He will know full well that paragraph 14(c) of the model contract for special advisers exempts special advisers from the requirements for impartiality and objectivity. Special advisers are not expected to work for a different Administration. The point is that special advisers can put a political slant on matters, as one should not expect civil servants to do. That is the point of the distinct designation of special advisers. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is fully aware of the point.

I was taken aback by the Liberal Democrats' apparent verbal dyslexia in talking about "carnage over Christmas". I would understand it if they had talked about the "carnival over Christmas" for the press and the other media, and for those who got themselves into a terrible fix. However, it was certainly not carnage—*[Interruption.]* Two Ministers did resign. However, there was a marked difference between that and events in the previous Government, when evidence of wrongdoing was plain, but Ministers hung on by their fingernails until their fingers bled.

Responsibility is taken seriously in this Government. When someone feels that they are detracting from the impact that the Government are making or want to make, they expeditiously resign. That is what happened over Christmas. I do not call that carnage, unless carnage can be self-inflicted.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): The Minister will recall that, on taking up his current post, the Minister for the Cabinet Office said that his objective was to reduce the amount of backbiting, counter-briefing and briefing against colleagues. In the light of the events of the past month, has not the right hon. Gentleman failed abjectly to achieve his objective?

Mr. Kilfoyle: The short answer is no. The hon. Gentleman is a member of the Public Administration Select Committee and should be au fait with events in the Cabinet Office—how it was reconfigured and how roles were redefined. I am full of praise for the way in which my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office has dealt with the one or two little hiccups that we have had in recent months. Along the way, he has been able, with his usual aplomb, to swat aside Opposition Members and journalists. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that point.

I should deal with the point made by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, who talked about a terrible series of calamities that befell the Government. He used terminology that was indicative of the problem with much of so-called "spin". He directly quoted Chris Buckland; he referred to his opinion of Whelan and to his having said of him, "he is suspected of". I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, when they bother to turn out for our debates, there is a great variety of commentators and reporters in the Press Gallery. Some of them are extremely well-informed, whereas others would have done credit to Jonathan Swift's Grub street. Nevertheless, we do not take as gospel everything that is said or imputed by every newspaper, or in every radio broadcast and television news-spot.

We should deal rather more with the substantive issues. The problem is that people have been more concerned with the froth and bubble than with the substance of the issues.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Is the Minister suggesting that it was a "carnival" for two of his very senior colleagues to be driven from the Government, and that it was all got up by the press?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am not suggesting anything of the sort. I was suggesting that there was a carnival for the press—a feeding frenzy—which was not unusual. I am sure that the frenzy will continue until the press finds fresh targets. The hon. Members for Lewes (Mr. Baker) and for North Devon repeatedly mentioned "carnage". My definition of the word is entirely different from theirs.

I should like to take issue with some of the points made by some of those who did speak in the debate. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), for example, misconstrued—as some type of crude and opportunistic populism—the Government's wish to represent people's real interests by ascertaining what they think. I reject the misconstruction. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) correctly pointed out that our initiatives such as, for example, the people's panel—in which we try to discover what people really think about the Government's policies—are, if anything, undervalued.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) mentioned Jonathan Haslam. When Mr. Haslam was questioned on the matter, he wrote a disclaimer—which I had, but seem to have lost. He said that some of the comments attributed to him had nothing to do with him. I have found the missing letter. To provide some perspective on the allegations of the politicisation and purge of press officers at the GICS, I shall quote from Jonathan Haslam's letter to the Committee Clerk. He said:

"There has been a great deal of misinformed comment about my reasons for leaving the civil service, most recently in an article by Mr. Andy Wood in *The Sunday Times*. It might be helpful for the Committee to know the facts."

It might be inconvenient for Opposition Members if the facts turn out to be rather different from those that have been suggested. Mr. Haslam continued:

"I left the civil service entirely at my own wish, to seek new challenges and rewards in the private sector. I did so against a background of working closely with David Blunkett at the Department for Education and Employment . . . and operated on friendly terms with them and my civil service colleagues. I am perfectly content for these facts to be spelt out publicly again should any suggestions to the contrary emerge during the course of the Committee's inquiry."

If a Government information officer feels that he or she has a problem with the Prime Minister's official spokesman, he or she can go to his or her deputy, who is a member of the Government information service, to the head of profession in the information service or to the civil service commissioners so that any wrongs can be righted. The GICS is certainly not afflicted by a climate

of fear or oppression, which is why those at the GICS were so enthusiastic and productive in consultations on the Mountfield report, which deals with their own future.

As there is not much time left in this debate, I shall say only that the other half of the Liberal Democrats' motion dealt with the freedom of information Bill. The Government have made a firm manifesto commitment to introduce such a Bill, and I pay tribute to work done on the Bill in the Government's early days by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields. He will be the first to recognise the complexities involved, on arriving in government, in framing a freedom of information Bill that meets all the needs. It is an immense project. We have set out to achieve that. My right hon. Friend produced an important White Paper. There will be three months' pre-legislative scrutiny. A draft Bill will provide an opportunity for further representations to be made because we want to get it right.

I ask the House to accept the Government amendment and reject the motion.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 42, Noes 331.

Division No. 32] **[7 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gorrie, Donald
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Edward Davey.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher

Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and Jane Kennedy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's commitment to modernising Government; commends the professionalism of the Government Information and Communications Service (GICS) in carrying out the important task of effectively communicating and explaining policies, decisions and actions of the Government of the day; recognises that the Mountfield Report set out the future direction of the GICS and confirmed the long accepted conventions of impartiality and propriety; believes that the model contract for special advisers, which defined, for the first time in a public document, the roles and responsibilities of special advisers, should be welcomed; applauds the Government's intention to publish a draft Freedom of Information Bill as soon as possible; and welcomes the intention of the Select Committee on Public Administration to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill.

UK Role in Europe

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I must tell the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.14 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the display of "absentee government" by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in failing to be present at the official launch of the euro and in not giving a clear lead to British businesses in relation to future UK membership of the euro; believes that the Government's failure to come to terms with the euro will undermine the prospects for exercising British leadership in Europe; calls on the Government to set out a clear strategy and timetable for British membership of the euro, including measures to accelerate convergence of interest rates, an early report on plans to make Britain's inflation target compatible with that used within the euro zone, urgent clarification of the remit of the cross-party euro preparations committee, initiation of an annual HM Treasury report to Parliament on progress on the Government's five convergence criteria, and steps to encourage an open debate on the appropriate level at which sterling should join the euro; and further urges the Government to contribute to the development of a European Union which is open, accountable, democratic and decentralised, and in which the powers of European institutions, the constitutional relationship between the EU and member states and the rights of the citizens of EU member states are more clearly defined through the establishment of a constitution for Europe.

I begin by welcoming the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to his new role and—although she is not here—by congratulating the new Paymaster General on her, perhaps unexpected, promotion.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The Paymistress General.

Mr. Bruce: I think she is still called the Paymaster General. I hope that they will engage with us in the debate, even though this is the Chief Secretary's first outing. Nevertheless, it is a pity that, over the past month, the internal warfare of the Government has been a distraction from key policy issues facing the country—not least, during the middle of the mayhem, the introduction of the euro among 11 members on continental Europe: a matter of crucial importance to the future of this country.

In relation to the euro in particular, the lack of clarity on policy—not merely the chaos in the top echelons of Government—has been responsible for what I can only describe as a very low profile for the Chancellor and his team during that crucial episode. The Chancellor's own contribution to the relaunch of new Labour this week was a speech on Monday—I read the entire text—which failed even to mention the euro. In the first weeks of this new year, the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not even mention the euro—even though the speech was billed by the Chancellor himself as a look at

"the wider horizon of our vision . . . the country which we will build in the years ahead."

I am sorry that the Chancellor will not seize the opportunity that we have given him today, since the launch of the euro, to shed some light from his perspective on the Government's position on the matter. That is in no way to denigrate the Chief Secretary's contribution to the debate. I wonder whether the Chancellor is still being distracted by the internal divisions within the Government. The funny thing about the Chancellor's speech is that, although there was no room to mention the euro, he did find space on page 5 to emphasise that action was needed urgently to tackle what he called the

"culture of adversarial industrial relations in the workplace."

I just wonder whether that was a reference to his own workplace.

On the same page of his speech, the Chancellor said that he wanted to bring to an end the era of "absentee government". That seems particularly resonant when we are talking about the Government's handling of the euro. It seems to me, and to my party, that "absentee government" is precisely what the country is being offered in relation to this hugely important issue—absentee government when it comes to policy conviction or serious preparations, and even at the launch of the euro itself, when the Chancellor just decided to stay away. He is absent again today, ducking the first opportunity to tell us what the Government are doing about this central issue. So much for the Prime Minister's claim that the Government are returning to dealing with substance.

It is sad and extraordinary that, in the days that marked the beginning of this project, Britain's Chancellor was lying low at home in Scotland—where, incidentally, according to today's edition of *The Scotsman*, enthusiasm for the euro is a lot greater than in the rest of the UK; opinion is evenly divided. Interestingly enough, while the Chancellor was keeping quiet in Scotland, the shadow Chancellor was apparently touring the Pacific on business for an American investment bank. We had absentee government from the Chancellor and absentee opposition from the Conservative party. That is what Britain is getting on the issue of the euro.

My party regrets that the Government have not taken a clearer position and made greater efforts to convince the public of the potential benefits. We unashamedly regret the fact that not enough is being done to prepare Britain for the option of joining. The Chief Secretary will no doubt respond to that, but the Government's position, according to the Chancellor, is that they are determined to "prepare and then decide"—to put in place the necessary preparations while making absolutely no commitment on the final decision.

Would not a sensible Government decide first, and commit itself to, when, rather than if? Surely the logical decision would be to decide and then prepare, rather than the other way round. It is simply impossible for the Government to prepare seriously for the euro while remaining committed to a policy of indecision.

The Chancellor's approach means that what is being done by the Government tend to be only the small things that are not central to convergence or to preparation, with the rather big things being left undone. In the past few days, I have had a number of discussions with large and small businesses in Scotland and in England, and the definite response that I received was that people are looking for clarity and a clear lead from the Government on business decisions. How can anyone expect the private sector—hard-headed business men and business women—to invest serious amounts of cash in preparations that could turn out to be simply a waste of time? As a representative of one organisation said to me, if the Government are not prepared to tell us what they intend to do, why do they expect us to put our money where their mouth is not?

Jacqui Smith (Redditch): In the interests of clarity, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Liberal

[Jacqui Smith]

Democrats believe that, regardless of the British economic interest, regardless of convergence criteria and regardless of where we are in the economic cycle, we should rush into the euro now?

Mr. Bruce: No. I am sorry that I gave way.

I should tell the Chief Secretary that "prepare and decide" is a political strategy to get through the next general election; it is not a sensible economic strategy designed to promote the national economic interest. My only comment on the intervention of the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith) is that the Government must make clear their position if they are to provide leadership in the national economic interest.

We have rehearsed many times in the House the arguments for and against the euro in principle. That is not the subject on which I shall focus now. We know where most of us—although perhaps not the Government—stand on the issue. I ask the Government to do four specific things to advance preparations for the euro.

I hope that, on his first outing, the Chief Secretary will engage with us on these four points and give us four specific answers. His two new Labour predecessors proved to be careful and competent batsmen who could be relied on—that was their characteristic—to stay safely at the wicket and play a straight bat. I hope that we can use our debate to advance understanding of Government policy and to make some constructive suggestions, and I urge the Government to respond. If the debate has been worth while, it will leave us better informed about Government policy and what the Government propose to do to plan and prepare.

My first question relates to the Government's target for inflation. If we are to join the European single currency, we will eventually need to move to monitoring or targeting in terms of the harmonised index of consumer prices, as used in the euro zone. That raises important questions about the composition of different inflation indices, which may reflect different spending patterns in different member states, and how a new target will be defined.

According to one or two reports that appeared over the new year period, the Government seem to be briefing some newspapers on the matter already. I was asked to contribute to a discussion on it on "The World at One" around new year. Are the Government committed to introducing a target for the harmonised measure of inflation during this Parliament? What issues are the Government examining in that connection? When will we have an announcement on the matter, given the important effect that it would have on monetary policy, inflation expectations and the Bank of England's inflation target?

My second point relates to the stability and level of the pound. The Government are well aware that our membership of the euro could be blocked, at least for a time, if existing members cannot be shown a sustained period of stability in our exchange rate in the run-up to membership, or if they believe that the pound is fundamentally misaligned. The Government are sometimes a little complacent in assuming that that issue does not need to be addressed.

I draw the attention of the House to an article in *The Independent* today, which I suspect did not arrive there by sheer chance. It claims that the Treasury has submitted an unpublished report on the matter to the European Commission. When is the report to be made available to the House? *[Interruption.]* I hear that it is in the Library, but it is described in *The Independent* as "an unpublished report".

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alan Milburn): As a point of information to assist the hon. Gentleman, the report alluded to in *The Independent*—he should not necessarily believe everything that he reads in that newspaper or any other—which we submitted to the European Commission before Christmas was placed simultaneously in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Bruce: I see. The report was presumably placed in the Library when the House was in recess, with no notification to any hon. Member of the fact that it had been placed there. Another example, then, of open government and freedom of information.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Did my hon. Friend hear a Minister earlier today denying that his Government ever made important statements without bringing them to the House? In the previous debate, during which I do not think the Chief Secretary was present, one of his colleagues stated explicitly that, when an important document was to be published, a statement would be made to the House. That does not seem to have happened.

Mr. Bruce: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point which shows how these two debates fit logically back to back.

The Independent reports that the document states that

"the new arrangements provide the best platform to deliver greater stability in the sterling-euro exchange rate."

I do not know what those arrangements are. Do the Government envisage any policy mechanisms to stabilise the euro-sterling rate? Will the Chief Secretary clarify that? If the Government have put a paper in the Library dealing with their policy to stabilise the exchange rate, will they tell us what their policy is, what the rate is and how they propose to achieve it?

If, as I suspect, that is just a general statement that the Chancellor is using to inform the debate without specific commitments, will he tell us what the Government think might be an appropriate rate for sterling to join the euro? Such a debate would help to create a consensus that could give stability to the pound in what would otherwise be rather turbulent waters.

In my discussions with business people in the past day or two, a number of them said that, although the launch of the euro had gone relatively smoothly, they could foresee mid-year circumstances that could create turbulence in the market and cause sterling either to shoot up or to shoot down, which would be extremely destabilising to an already fragile British economy.

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): According to the hon. Gentleman, he is the only one who has been working over Christmas, while everyone else has been doing other things. His motion refers to the level at which sterling

should join the euro. As he has been working so hard, can he tell us at what rate he would wish sterling to join the euro?

Mr. Bruce: That is extraordinary. The Government will not even tell us whether they think there should be a rate, but they expect us to tell them what the rate should be. If that is the standard of debate on an issue as serious as this, we are in deep trouble. If that is the sort of leadership that the Government can offer, the country faces a serious problem. We need a more intelligent contribution than that to the debate.

Will the Chief Secretary describe to the House the remit of the new euro preparations committee, which has not yet met, even though its formation was announced four months ago? I understand that all parties may not yet have submitted nominations, but that is no reason to delay consideration of the remit and no reason why the committee should not meet at an early date. Does the Chief Secretary agree that the committee must consider preparations for possible British membership if it is in our interests to join?

To suggest that the euro preparations committee should not be allowed to discuss the possibility of Britain's joining is preposterous. No major party in the House is committed to staying out of the euro for all time—at least not yet. I do not know whether the shadow Chancellor has returned from the Pacific, but, if he withdraws his nominee, as I understand that he has suggested that he might, because the committee's remit is too wide and includes the possibility of Britain's joining, will the Chief Secretary offer the Conservative place to a Tory of a more sensible disposition?

If the Chancellor's five economic tests are to mean anything, will he undertake—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There are far too many sedentary interjections from the Government Benches. I should be grateful if they ceased.

Mr. Bruce: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Will the Chancellor undertake to present an annual report to the House on progress towards meeting his tests? Will he allow for a regular debate on the progress being made on convergence? We have suggested that the Bank of England and the Treasury jointly should make half-yearly reports on convergence, stating first the progress that has been made and, secondly, what further steps need to be taken to ensure that convergence continues.

It remains my view that, whether we are in favour of joining at the earliest date, at an early date or in the fairly near future, or not even in the long term, we need to have a sensible strategy for how we are to live with the euro and what sort of exchange rate and interest rate convergence is sensible or necessary. Surely it is reasonable to suggest that we should have a report from the Government. I believe that it would serve to persuade some of us who are somewhat doubtful that the five tests are really relevant to policy. A regular report might clearly define where the Government stand, whereas at present some of us think that the tests are an infinitely elastic excuse for a Government whose policy is being driven by political rather than economic considerations.

There is a wider issue which I hope that my hon. Friends—

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bruce: No. I am moving on.

I hope that my hon. Friends, if they are able to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be able to elaborate on this issue later in the debate. It is our belief that the euro could be a huge advantage to Britain economically. It is our belief also that it will be acceptable to the British people only in the context of a Europe which is seen to be open, accountable, democratic and decentralised. We do not believe that it is only the British who take that view; indeed, there is wide support for it.

In that event, we need a Europe in which the nature and the limits of the power of European institutions are clearly defined. As Liberal Democrats, we find it odd that we are about to create a decentralised United Kingdom in circumstances where others are talking about powers that are being dragged unnecessarily to the centre of an excessively centralised European Union. That is not the way in which we see it. That is why we believe in the development of a European constitution, which would define and limit the powers of Europe.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bruce: I will in a minute.

I am talking about an idea that appeared in the memoirs of Lord Lawson of Blaby. Although my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) has developed it as a Liberal Democrat view, it is not peculiar to our thinking.

Mr. Bercow: In the Liberal Democrat policy document entitled "Moving Ahead", published in the autumn of 1998, it is claimed on page 106 that the Liberal Democrat party is committed to the retention of the veto on tax matters. Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether Liberal Democrats are committed to the retention of the veto in relation to business, savings and personal taxes, or only in relation to personal tax rates?

Mr. Bruce: We meant what we said. We would retain the veto that now exists on tax matters. If there is any doubt in the hon. Gentleman's mind, let me point out that it is our belief that the corollary of a European single currency with a European Central bank and a common rate of interest is that we need tax competition and tax flexibility. We are extremely robust on all three points. We are clear about that.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington) *rose—*

Mr. Bruce: No. I am coming towards the end of my remarks.

We need greater accountability on the part of European institutions. It is true that problems in Europe are often much exaggerated by those who have an alternative agenda, but I accept that problems, such as the current fraud issues, exist and that they must be dealt with firmly. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches have reason to be

[Mr. Bruce]

proud that the European Liberal Democrats are leading the way in trying to bring accountability to Europe and to the Commission. If commissioners have failed to act effectively against fraud, Liberal Democrats believe that they should be held to account. We have no hesitation in saying that they should leave their jobs and in naming and identifying those whom we think should resign. Nobody should be beyond democratic accountability.

Our conclusion is that Britain's role in Europe cannot be allowed to continue under absentee government. That started under the previous Prime Minister and we have not broken away from it adequately. It is surely time for the Government urgently to take a lead on issues in Europe. However, for the Government to be able to give a lead in Europe effectively, they must first lead opinion in Britain—something that they are abjectly failing to do.

7.35 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alan Milburn): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"recognises the importance to the British economy of continued membership of the European Community; welcomes the step change that the Government has made in its economic relations with the UK's European partners and the real benefits that constructive engagement has brought for Britain; commends the progress made by the Government in promoting economic reform in Europe as the basis for growth and job creation; welcomes the Government's ongoing programme of practical assistance to British business on the implications of the euro; commends the Bank of England and the financial services industries for the skill and expertise with which they managed Britain's part in the transition of 1st January 1999; and welcomes the Government's decision to make the national economic interest the key test for British entry to the single currency on the basis of five economic tests and that any final decision should be made by the British people as set out in the Chancellor's statement to the House of 27th October 1997."

I thank the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) for his warm welcome for my promotion to my new responsibilities. *[Interruption.]* I thank also Opposition Members for their support.

On 1 January, the single European currency became a reality. That being so, this is a timely debate. The launch in the dealing rooms and on trading floors across the world was almost flawless. The success of that launch reflects the extent of the planning and preparation carried out by firms and institutions throughout Europe. In London, over the Christmas and new year period, about 30,000 City staff were involved in preparing for the start of euro trading. Those efforts deserve considerable praise and I hope that all hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to all those involved for all of their efforts, and to the crucial role played by the Bank of England. It is thanks to them that London can now rightly claim to be the financial home of the euro, the principal international centre for euro trading.

The hon. Member for Gordon made in large part a serious speech. It deserves serious consideration. It is a shame, therefore, that his speech was so badly flawed by rather flippant and frivolous remarks about my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is an absurd idea that somehow the Government absent themselves from the European debate and the European stage. The hon. Gentleman made rather unfortunate references, for example, to the fact that my right hon. Friend was not in attendance at the ECOFIN event at the launch of the euro. For information, the ECOFIN meeting was not a decision-making meeting; it was a publicity stunt.

Opposition parties usually spend their time accusing us of engaging rather too much in publicity stunts. I say to the hon. Member for Gordon, purely for information—he may read whatever he wishes into this—that it was not only the United Kingdom Finance Minister who was not present at the meeting; the German Finance Minister was not present either.

Overnight, from 1 January, the euro has become the world's second most important currency. It is now a reality, and not only for the 11 nations that joined the first wave. It is a reality also for the City of London and for the tens of thousands of businesses in our country that trade with Europe day in and day out. Its significance will increase, not diminish.

Europe is becoming more and not less important for Britain. Almost half our trade is with the euro zone, and that trade is increasing. Many companies are already pledged to use the euro regardless of whether Britain is in or out. It is in Britain's economic interest to influence the euro's development and to make it a success whether we are members or not. That is the Government's position. Indeed, the Government's policy on membership of the single currency is unchanged from the position set out by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to the House in October 1997.

We believe that, if the single European currency is successful, and if the economic benefits to the United Kingdom from joining are clear and unambiguous, Britain should be part of it. We have set out five real economic tests against which Britain's economic interests in relation to the single currency can be judged. The tests define whether a clear and unambiguous case can be made for British entry, and they are: the level of convergence; the flexibility of our economy; the impact on investment; the impact on financial services, including in the City; and, of course, the impact on British jobs.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Does the Minister think that the convergence criteria should be expressed entirely in nominal terms, or should they involve real economic criteria?

Mr. Milburn: We have set out clearly, as we did in October 1997, what is required before a British decision to join. A number of key economic tests have been set, and we require, in particular, a period of stability and sustained convergence. All hon. Members should note what is perhaps most crucial: as the Chancellor made clear in October 1997, our participation—or otherwise—depends not only on what the Government and Parliament decide, but on what the British people decide in a referendum.

We will recommend joining if, and only if, it is in the national economic interest to do so—a decision that will not be possible until early in the next Parliament. Unlike the Conservative party, we do not believe that there is a constitutional bar to membership, but we do believe that the magnitude of the decision to enter requires a referendum of the British people. The British economy is not currently convergent with the rest of Europe.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The House will be pleased to hear the Chief Secretary

reassert the Government's commitment to a referendum. Does he accept, however, that a referendum would be all the more binding if, beforehand, a White Paper were published setting out clearly the constitutional implications and the price to be paid if we join the single currency?

Mr. Milburn: The right hon. Gentleman is an assiduous attender of the House, and I assume that he was present when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor spoke on 27 October 1997, setting out the constitutional issues. My right hon. Friend has said that the pooling of economic sovereignty is, of course, an issue, but it is not a sufficient bar to membership of the European single currency. All that has been covered. The current issue is that of our preparations to ensure that we have a real choice about whether to join. We must consider the requirements around convergence and stability. Since 1 January, the euro is no longer a matter of principle or debate, but a reality for tens of thousands of British businesses which will need help in informing their views about the potential gain from the single currency. Far from absenting ourselves on those issues, the Government are determined to help British business to prepare to trade in the euro.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Is that an active or a passive process? Will the Government set out specific measures to achieve convergence over a given time scale that allows a choice of yes or no to be made? Alternatively, will the Government simply sit back and wait to see what happens, and then give us their verdict on whether convergence has happened?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman's charge is simply wrong. The Government have demonstrated three forms of leadership on this matter. First, we have provided leadership to ensure that we overcome the boom and bust cycle of the past, particularly during the previous Government's economic policy, and that is in the British interest for the long term. Secondly, we have helped British business to prepare for the reality of dealing with the euro. Thirdly, and in contradiction of what the hon. Gentleman and his party allege in the motion, we have given leadership in Europe on economic reform and other vital matters to do with our national economic interest.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Is it not true that the longer we stay out, the more we shall lose political influence in Europe? Is there not a danger of repeating exactly the same mistake made by every British Government since 1945, Conservative and Labour—missing the boat? We shall pay a political and economic price for that.

Mr. Milburn: In all candour, I must tell my hon. Friend, for whom I have the greatest respect, that we must take decisions in the British economic interest. That is the yardstick against which we must judge our decisions. The British economy is not currently in convergence with the rest of Europe. In part, we are at a different stage of the economic cycle, as can be seen from the difference in our interest rates. In part, too, the United Kingdom's current divergence is a legacy of our past susceptibility to boom and bust, notably during the damaging boom of the late 1980s and the severe recession that followed in the early 1990s.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Milburn: I shall in a moment, but I have given way several times already and want to make some progress.

Before Britain can be in a position to join, we need a period of preparation and a settled and sustained period of convergence. The Government inherited an economy with serious fundamental weaknesses. The familiar cycle of boom and bust was beginning to reappear. Inflation was rising because the previous Government had failed to take the necessary action. The national debt had been allowed to double, and the public finances were out of control. The Tories claim that all that amounts to a golden economic legacy. The truth is that, in the 18 years under their stewardship, Britain suffered the two worst recessions since the second world war. The UK had one of the highest average inflation rates and below average growth.

Mr. Curry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Milburn: Not at the moment.

The changes that we have made to the frameworks for monetary and fiscal policy are already delivering results. Low inflation is in line with the Government's target. Politics have been taken out of interest rates with independence for the Bank of England. We have the lowest long-term interest rates in 35 years. The Government are now living within their means, but are still able to invest £40 billion more in our schools and hospitals.

We are promoting greater flexibility in our economy and taking action to close the productivity gap with our competitors. Our new deals for the young and long-term unemployed are bringing fresh hope to communities up and down the country. Today, unemployment figures are down 26,000 on the previous three months, with more than 500,000 more people in work since the election. At a time of economic uncertainty across the world, the Government are giving clear economic leadership at home, steering a course of stability in an unstable and uncertain world.

Mr. Curry: Is the right hon. Gentleman not a little worried that events will move a great deal more rapidly than his stately timetable would suggest? Is there not a danger of the Government's losing control of events here and on the continent? Business needs to know where it stands, and it will increasingly demand to know. The debate on tax and other matters is proceeding in Europe and, to all intents and purposes, the referendum campaign has started. Should the Government not be in control of events, rather than risking the danger of being dragged behind them?

Mr. Milburn: I know the right hon. Gentleman's position on these matters, and I am sure that his Front-Bench colleagues are as interested in his position as I am. However, we are making active preparations to help

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business to be ready for the reality of the euro, and, before we can make any decision on whether to join, we must decide what is in the British economic interest. That was our position in October 1997, and it is our position now.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I offer my compliments to my right hon. Friend on his promotion.

In my right hon. Friend's opening remarks, he noted that 11 European Union member states have signed up to the single currency. That leaves four outside the euro. Are the other three member states adopting criteria similar to those that the Government have adopted in relation to joining? Is there any likelihood that, over the next few years, the United Kingdom will become the odd man out if the other three nations sign up?

Mr. Milburn: Frankly, those are decisions for the individual member states, just as we have to decide what is best for the British interest. That is our responsibility and that is their responsibility. I do not want to speak for other member states. I am keen to ensure that decisions taken here ensure that the British economic interest comes first.

Mr. Gardiner: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Milburn: I will not give way for a moment.

Therefore, we are giving clear leadership at home and, in answer to the hon. Member for Gordon, we are giving leadership by helping business to prepare for the euro. For business, the euro is a fact of life. Some people, notably right hon. and hon. Gentleman on the Conservative Front Bench would wish it away. Others wish that it would arrive sooner. Neither view is right for Britain.

Instead, the Government, in partnership with business, are helping British firms to come to terms with the new economic landscape that the euro has brought. In the past year, the Government have stepped up work with British companies to help to equip them to do business in the euro. Our nationwide information campaign has increased, by 150 per cent. since the general election, the number of small businesses that have made preparations for the euro.

The hon. Member for Gordon asked whether the Government had any plans to change the inflation target from RPIX to the harmonised index of consumer prices. As we have repeatedly said, we will monitor the target and the measure of inflation in the light of the practices of the European central bank. That is precisely what we are doing, but the United Kingdom is under no legal requirement to change our target measure of inflation to the harmonised European index, which the central bank has adopted.

Also, we will shortly publish an outline national changeover plan to set out the key steps that would need to be taken by business and the public sector to facilitate British entry into the euro, should we decide to enter.

Finally, the hon. Member for Gordon raised the important issue of the euro preparations committee. He is aware, as is the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) on the Conservative Front Bench, that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer wrote to all parties in November, asking them for nominations to that important committee. We have received nominations from all of the parties. The Chancellor wrote again last week, and I hope that all the parties represented in the House will take a responsible and positive attitude towards the committee, but time will tell.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I will not give way.

The Government want the single currency to succeed because it is in Britain's economic interests for it to do so. The prosperity of the British economy, both in manufacturing and in services, is closely linked to the euro's success. Those preparations are vital, too, if Britain is to have a genuine choice about joining the single currency.

The Government are providing leadership not only on the economy and on preparations for the euro, but in Europe too, by working in alliance with our European partners on a wide-ranging programme of economic reform. It is simply not true to say that, just because Britain is out of the euro, we are unable to shape developments in the European Union. The progress made under our presidency is clear evidence of that. A successful euro is one based on sound economics and markets that function well. Those ideas lie at the heart of the Government's agenda in Europe. Britain is playing a key role in taking them forward.

That is the Government's position on Europe and it is based on common sense, not narrow partisan ideology—national economic interest, not party interest. It is a principled position, which puts the national economic interest first.

Let us contrast the Government's policy with the position of the two major Opposition parties. On the one hand, the Liberals are prepared to say yes to joining the euro at any time, at any price. On the other, the Conservative party is prepared to say no to joining the euro—no at any price. We see uncritical support from the Liberals and uncritical opposition from the Tories. They are united only in their irresponsibility—an irresponsible neglect of the national economic interest.

The Liberals irresponsibly disregard the national economic interest for the sake of cloud-cuckoo economics. To join the single currency early, without the necessary convergence or preparations, would be a recipe for more, not less, instability.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Where are the preparations?

Mr. Milburn: I have just set some of them out.

The Liberal's position would be a classic mistake—seeking short-term solutions, rather than long-term solutions for long-term gain. It would be damaging for Britain and, frankly, for Europe. We need a period of stability and we need to have demonstrated sustainable convergence with the other European economies before we can join. That is yet another example of the same old fantasy economics from the Liberals, and now they want to halve Britain's interest rates overnight, without any regard for the state of the economic cycle or, indeed, the consequences for fiscal policy. Theirs is an economic

policy without the slightest grounding in reality—an irresponsible policy that is totally against Britain's economic interests.

At the other extreme stand Her Majesty's official Opposition, the Conservative party. From the Conservatives, we see only a pursuit of their narrow party interest at the expense of the national interest. They have ruled out membership of monetary union for 10 years, even if it were in Britain's national economic interest to join before then. It is an arbitrary policy, which closes down the options available to this country. It ignores our national economic interest.

These are the questions that the shadow Chief Secretary must answer. If the Conservatives' hostility to a single currency is one of principle, why not rule it out for ever? If it is pragmatic opposition, how can they rule it out for 10 years even if it is in Britain's interest to join? Having moved so far to the right, today's Tory party is simply anti-Europe. The real agenda of that party is withdrawal from Europe altogether, with all the damage that that would do to British interests, jobs and future British economic prosperity. Indeed, the hysteria in the Tory party is such that the shadow Trade and Industry Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood)—a man not known for his temperate views—was compelled to say at one point:

"If we sign the present draft of the Amsterdam Treaty we will abolish our country."

The truth is that the Conservative party is backward looking, with no vision of the future for our country. Meanwhile, a serious debate is going on in Europe about its direction. The Tories would isolate us from that debate, damaging Britain, the British economy, British business and British jobs. They are failing in opposition, just as they failed in government.

In contrast, the Government are working with our partners to shape Europe's future. The days of foghorn diplomacy—of shouting, but not being heard—are over. As the lifting of the beef ban shows, we can do more for Britain by working constructively in Europe. That approach—the Government's approach—goes with the grain of our history as a trading nation. Those who would turn Britain into an economic fortress are not only living in a dream world, but turning their backs on our history of commercial success over hundreds of years. Britain has always prospered best when we have led and looked outward. The Government are determined that we will help shape Europe's future, just as we have helped to shape its past. I commend the Government's amendment to the House.

7.59 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): This is the first time that the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) has appeared at the Dispatch Box in his new job. I congratulate him on attaining that position, which carries great responsibility. I hope that he lasts a bit longer than his two predecessors and I look forward to many exchanges with him about these and other issues.

The background to this debate is not simply the launch of the euro, although the Chief Secretary's speech concentrated on that. In the European Parliament, events of great importance are unfolding, with the possibility of a censure motion against the entire European Commission. That tells us something about the European Union and how the drive towards the big projects of political integration and the launch of a single European currency have sidelined other matters of equal importance, such as whether taxpayers' money is being properly applied. That should have engaged his attention; it was mentioned by the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce).

Fraud should worry the Treasury; not only is the general European taxpayer at risk, but the British taxpayer is disproportionately affected because of our very large annual contributions. They fluctuate from year to year for technical reasons but, averaged out, our gross contribution is nearly £18 million a day. We get some back—not necessarily for projects that we would choose to spend the money on—but our net contribution still runs at nearly £7 million every day. It was therefore doubly surprising that the Chief Secretary managed an entire speech on our relationship with the European Union, and our economic relationship in particular, without mentioning fraud and mismanagement.

The issue is not new. I am afraid that fraud and mismanagement are endemic in the European Union at all levels, and in the European Commission in particular. The European Court of Auditors produces a report every year itemising the scandalous waste and mismanagement of the European Union budget. I raise the matter now because of the debate that is taking place in the European Parliament and tomorrow's vote. I note that the problem is not new but the present revelations are interesting because they have come not from the European Commission, the Court of Auditors or member states, but from a Dutch official who blew the whistle and was promptly disciplined by his employer, the European Commission.

My point is relevant to the debate because, last year, the British presidency had an opportunity to do something about fraud and mismanagement. Indeed, at its start exactly a year ago, the Prime Minister and the Treasury announced that that was a British priority. Yet again, a huge gap has opened between what the Government said and what they did, between the rhetoric and the reality. For instance, spending on anti-fraud measures fell last year. One of the first things that the then Economic Secretary did, both last year and directly after the general election, was to tell European Standing Committee B that there would be a sharp reduction in the amount spent on anti-fraud measures. For greater accuracy, I have the figures.

In the internal market, industry and trans-European network, which is a huge item of expenditure, the sum allocated to anti-fraud measures—a tiny proportion of the overall sum—fell from 19.9 million ecu to 4.4 million ecu. At the same time, the Treasury and the Government were telling us how important they thought the drive against fraud and mismanagement was.

Exactly the same will happen next year. Expenditure on all the other programmes will go up but expenditure on anti-fraud measures will go down. That has now been spotted by the Select Committee on European Legislation, which reported to the House last July that the total budgetary provision for anti-fraud measures will drop next year by a further 20 million euros—a drop of nearly a third—on top of the drop the year before. When the Treasury was challenged about it, all that Ministers could

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say was that it did not matter because the rest of the Commission's budget would be directed to anti-fraud measures.

That is not the experience of Mr. Buitenen, the Dutch official faced with dismissal for blowing the whistle on the fraud and mismanagement at the heart of the Commission. The matter is very serious because he reports that, far from the Commission using its budget and making efforts to control fraud, it is part of the problem. It was not surprising that the Select Committee on European Legislation concluded its review of what the British Government were doing on fraud by saying that it was not convinced or impressed by the Minister's argument that a reduction of 20 million euros in the budgetary allocation did not imply a reduction in the effectiveness of the anti-fraud effort. I hope that Minister will tell us her attitude to the fraud and mismanagement in the budget, and what she is doing about it, because it is our taxpayers' money, which was voted by this House, that is being stolen and mismanaged.

I concede that it is not simply a question of spending money on anti-fraud efforts, but of political will. We therefore turned with some interest to the document "A New European Way", which was published last October by the socialist and social democratic Ministers of Finance in the European Union. It was reported that the Labour party had a prominent input. It is full of the usual waffle about a people's Europe. There are descriptions of all the wonderful things that can be done with the European budget—more trans-European networks and all the rest of it. There is not a single line, word or mention of fraud or mismanagement. All that stuff during the European presidency about how it was a priority—for the Treasury, I think that it was the priority—did not get translated into action during the British presidency, or in the document published by the left-of-centre Finance Ministers last October. That is eloquent testimony to what the Labour Government really think about fraud in the European Union and its institutions.

The reason for all this is that the Government are so anxious to fit into the European Union scene that they do not want to be accused of doing anything that might discredit the EU. We are well past that. The days when it could all be covered up so as not to startle the public are long past. The public know perfectly well what is going on and want something done about it. The European Parliament socialist group is manoeuvring to keep individual Commissioners from being singled out and asked to resign.

Mr. Lock: Do the right hon. Gentleman's views about the public knowing what is going on extend to his former colleague Mr. Phillip Oppenheim's description of the shadow Cabinet as consisting of donkeys, too many old faces, too many debts from the leadership election; in short, too many sad reminders of unhappy times past. Is that what the public are well aware of?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Is that really the best that Labour can come up with? I advise the hon. Gentleman to have another go. This is a debate about the European Union. It is telling, and will have been noted by my hon. Friends, that Labour has nothing to say about the European Union and no defence to what I was saying about slashing anti-fraud measures or about the attitude of his colleagues in the European Parliament socialist group. They are clearly more interested in protecting individual socialist commissioners than in protecting the European taxpayer.

It has been left to the right of centre group, the European People's party, and, in particular, Conservative Members of the European Parliament, who have been doing what they can to strengthen the procedures against fraud in the EU, to get something done and, in particular, to stop the Commission and its employees hiding behind diplomatic immunity.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I hope very much that British Conservative Members of the European Parliament will support the motion of censure tabled by my colleague, Pat Cox, in the European Parliament tomorrow. However, I hear that the Christian Democrat group is doing a deal with the socialist group in order to back Jacques Santer. Is that correct?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If the hon. Gentleman wants to look at the voting record, he will have to wait until tomorrow evening. But in the few short weeks after these revelations first became clear, the Conservative group in the European Parliament has done more to strip away the diplomatic immunity than the European Parliament socialist group, with all its waffle and posturing. Therefore, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we and our colleagues in the European Parliament do not just talk about this, we do something about it.

I, too, wish to congratulate all those in Britain who worked over the new year on the launch of the new currency in order to make it stable and successful. I was rather surprised by the tone of the exchanges was between the hon. Member for Gordon and the Chief Secretary. They were hardly in the spirit of the new alliance about which we keep reading, or at least pressed so strongly by the leaders of their respective parties. It is early in the new year, but all the festive spirit appears to have worn off. That is particularly so in that they have been squabbling about essentially constitutional matters.

The joint Cabinet Committee on those matters is not new. Throughout last year, the Liberal Democrats sat on a Government Sub-Committee discussing constitutional matters. One would have thought that, by now, they would have come to some kind of agreement, or at least a meeting of minds. Very sharp differences have again been exposed today.

We know—I think it is beyond dispute—that joining the euro will mean a massive and irreversible transfer of decision making from people who are elected and can be removed at home, to people who are not elected and cannot be removed in the institutions of the EU. That is practically a definition of a constitutional issue.

The Liberal Democrats welcome that. They cannot wait to give away those powers. For them, the creation of a European economic and political state is desirable, and they cannot get to it soon enough. The Labour party position seems to be simply to deny that that is ever likely to happen. That is again demonstrated by the amendment. The only tests that it raises for consideration of British entry are the five economic tests. There is not a word here about any constitutional implications.

Mr. Hogg: Is not another indication of the lack of importance that the Chief Secretary attaches to the

constitutional issues his refusal to commit the Government to publishing a White Paper on the constitutional implications of the single currency as a prelude to holding the referendum?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. Conservative Members understand that it is not good enough simply to talk about economic tests, because joining a single European currency and giving up sterling is not just a question of changing the face on the bank notes; it is about a transfer of powers. That is a constitutional matter. We are owed an explanation and a promise that, before we go any further, a White Paper at the very least will be published and presented to the House.

A useful feature of the creation and launch of the euro on 1 January this year is that it has been accompanied by some candid remarks from other EU politicians about precisely these constitutional implications. It is clear that the launch of the new currency signals a new drive towards political and economic integration.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The Chief Secretary said in his closing remarks that a serious debate is going on in Europe about this, but does my right hon. Friend agree that much of that debate is about constitutional matters, and yet not only was the constitution argument not mentioned tonight, or simply dismissed, but the Government have actively tried to suppress debate on it?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government do not know whether to deny that or ignore it, but it is taking place. We in Britain sometimes pride ourselves on the quality of our debate on those matters, but we are wrong. In many respects, a more honest debate is taking place on the continent, where it is freely admitted that there are those constitutional implications. They know that, at root, it is a political project.

Mr. Bercow: Further to what our hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) has just said, does my right hon. Friend recall, in talking about the constitutional issues, that the former Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe González, writing in May of this year, quite explicitly said:

"The single currency is the greatest abandonment of national sovereignty since the foundation of the European Community."

He went on to support it, saying:

"We need this united Europe. We must never forget that the euro is an instrument for this project."

Would it not be a useful addition to the reading list of the Chief Secretary to have a collection of the former Spanish Prime Minister's speeches in his red box?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is right. There is an essential deceit at the core of the Government's position on the euro in that it denies that this is at root a political project.

Mr. Plaskitt: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Will the hon. Gentleman excuse me? I want to make progress and I am aware that other hon. Members want to contribute in due course.

When the German Finance Minister, Mr. Lafontaine, announced last year moves towards tax harmonisation, he was dismissed by the Government as someone who was simply making a private contribution to the debate, even though, as we know, a British Treasury Minister is chairing the EU committee which is charged with eradicating what is called unfair tax competition. I would say in passing that that committee's proceedings are secret. We know that British taxes are under scrutiny by an EU committee chaired by a Treasury Minister, but the House is not allowed to know about it.

We know from leaks that more than 80 tax measures are under consideration, and some of them are British, but the House, which was founded on the supposition that we alone control taxation, is not allowed to know which taxes are under consideration.

Mr. Plaskitt *rose-*

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow) *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), and then perhaps to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt).

Mr. Rammell: The right hon. Gentleman is clearly exercised about the committee. How, in principle, is that different from the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Norman Lamont, negotiating and agreeing the standardisation of VAT rates, as he did in 1991?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Everything that Lord Lamont did was public. The position that he was taking was well known. We had debates in the House about it. That is the difference. We had an opportunity to comment and to vote. In the committee on unfair tax competition, a secret agenda is being drawn up to reverse tax measures passed by the House, some of them in this Government's first Budget. For example, it is rumoured that concessions to the British film industry are now under consideration. They were passed by the House less than 18 months ago, but they now fall foul of the rule against unfair tax competition.

It is not only tax harmonisation that is being considered in Europe. The German Foreign Minister is saying that the European Union should now proceed by majority voting in all areas except important treaty changes. I suppose that the Government will now dismiss him as a deranged individual speaking solely in a private capacity, but he and others are speaking the truth. I do not dismiss German and French Ministers as people who are simply speculating about their private desires and priorities; they are speaking on behalf of their Government and, in the case of the German Minister, after a recent general election, so they are right to highlight the eventual destination of the euro project. It is only the Government who are fooling themselves and trying to fool the public that that is not the case.

Mr. Plaskitt: If, as the right hon. Gentleman makes out, those considerations are all constitutional impediments to sterling's entry to the euro zone, how does he imagine they will dissolve in 10 years?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: They probably will not dissolve. It is likely that, when tax harmonisation becomes

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a reality rather than just an aim, that will be a further objection for Parliament and the British people to consider before they make up their mind. The Government's object is to smuggle matters through before they become clear and their implications are fully understood.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not giving way. I promised that I would make progress and I want to cover one more area of policy.

My essential point is that the Government face big issues on taxation in Europe, budgetary reform, the future voting system in Europe and monetary and economic integration, and there is a wide and growing gap between other member states' ambitions and what this country wants and what the Government say that they want. That is where self-delusion sets in. They honestly believe that they can head off all those powerful forces even though those forces are specifically promoted by France, Germany and almost all the other European Union member states.

Rather than confronting the issues, the Government are simply ignoring them because they do not want to be isolated. They are terrified of losing what they call influence, but the best influence that we have in the European Union comes, not from going along with what the EU proposes, but from our example. By avoiding the job-destroying regulations in the European Union and by not harmonising our taxes upwards to European Union rates, over the past few years this country has created jobs as fast as EU countries have been destroying them. That is the golden economic legacy that the Chief Secretary referred to in his speech, and we are proud of it.

The hon. Member for Gordon referred to the exchange rate. When will the Government come clean about their policy on the exchange rate? They smuggled out a document shortly before Christmas about the convergence programme, but they owe an explanation to the House. I have read the document, and it does not broach the issue of the treaty requirement for us to join an exchange rate mechanism as a prior condition to joining the euro. The treaty requirement is not that Britain should have joined the original exchange rate mechanism—that collapsed in 1993. The obligation remains. The decision cannot wait until after a referendum because that is when the Government would want to join the euro. They must start the process now.

Questions to the Government remain. Will the Chancellor decide that we should shadow the euro, and if so, when? The document contains only the usual waffle about exchange rate stability being a product of domestic and macro-economic stability. We all know that, but it does not answer the question of what the Government will do about the fact that they are committed in principle to joining the euro but there is a precondition that they must shadow or join a exchange rate mechanism with the euro.

We want to know—the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), who will reply to the debate, will be able to tell us—whether the Treasury representative on the Monetary Policy Committee is now being told to make that precondition a consideration in setting interest rates. In other words, will interest rates increasingly be set to suit, not domestic economic requirements, but external requirements? That information should not be published or hinted at in a document placed in the Library; it ought to be explained to the House. The matter goes to the heart of how we control the domestic economy.

As the Government are committed in principle to the huge and irrevocable step to give up our domestic currency and join the euro, why are they so shy about hinting at or explaining the need to shadow the euro or join an exchange rate mechanism? That step could be reversed. Why are they so timid about taking the first steps when they are already committed to the final destination?

Mr. Öpik: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall give way briefly.

Mr. Öpik: I want to ask a short question. Am I to deduce from what the right hon. Gentleman has said that the Conservative bar to entry is cast in stone until 2008?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No. The hon. Gentleman has misunderstood me. I am pointing out the self-evident truth that there are not only economic and financial matters to be assessed but constitutional questions. The Liberal Democrats at least accept that those constitutional changes are desirable, but the Government are denying that they are even considerations. That is a deceitful attitude, which I am exposing in this brief debate. We want to be assured, not only that there are economic advantages beyond dispute, but that those constitutional objections can be answered and overcome. The more that we learn about those constitutional issues, the more distasteful the entire project will seem.

We have heard in the debate that the Government are facing hard choices on Europe. Their response, on Europe and other measures, is to avoid those choices. As we have seen over the past few weeks, the Government spend a good deal of time fighting among themselves, but that is not an excuse. We now want them to turn outwards and start to answer questions about our relationship with the European Union.

This week, there has already been a relaunch of policies, which is always a sign that a Government are in deep trouble. Rather than relaunching or rehashing previously announced policies—many of them inherited from us—let the Government tell us how they intend to tackle the issues on Europe. Will they start to tell us the truth about what is on offer in the European Union and to govern on behalf of the people of the United Kingdom rather than in the interests of the Labour party?

8.29 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): In this debate on the role of the United Kingdom in Europe, I want to deal with a wider issue than the one that has so far been addressed—the euro. Before I do so, I shall make a few comments about Liberal Democrat and Conservative contributions.

I say to the Liberal Democrats that it is an untenable position to argue so fervently in favour of entering the euro without taking into account the economic cycle. The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) kept avoiding that point. There is obviously a case for trying to bring economies into line, but the last Conservative Government tried to do that; the Liberal Democrats would try to do so and the Government are trying to do so. However, the British economy has tracked the north American economy since the second world war more closely than it has tracked European economies and, for that reason, it is difficult to find a phase during which we could join the euro when it would not do devastating damage to the British economy. I believe that it can and will be done, but it is foolish to believe that it is possible to ignore the point of the economic cycle at which we join. No one will take the Liberal party seriously if it continues to argue on that basis without taking that point into account.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the United Kingdom economy has closely tracked the main European economies since the war, contrary to what he says, except during a short period after the second oil shock?

Mr. Soley: I do not think that that is right. One can quibble about the figures. That is another argument and, if the hon. Gentleman wishes to pursue it, I shall be happy to do so on another occasion. Overall, the British economy has been more likely to track the north American one.

I would find it easier to accept the criticisms voiced by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) about the Government's direction if I had not sat through the Conservatives' history in the past 15 years. I remember Baroness Thatcher joining the single market with enthusiasm. I, among others, said at the time that, once we joined the single market, it would be only a matter of time before we had a single currency. I remember the Conservative party firmly nailing into place the Single European Act—an Act that required us to follow the legislation that came from Brussels, albeit with the intervention and involvement of British Ministers. One knew then that we were speeding up on the road towards European integration.

I remember, as Conservative Members will remember only too clearly, the way in which the previous Conservative Government drove through the Maastricht Bill. One does not have to go back to the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who, as leader of the Conservative party, took the country into Europe, to see how Conservative Governments have enthusiastically taken us down the road towards greater European integration. Baroness Thatcher and the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) did the same.

There is only one explanation for Conservative Members' present position. Either they did not know what would happen, in which case they were incredibly naive and were shutting their ears to what everyone else was saying, or they knew but have now changed their minds. If they would start their interventions by saying that they have changed their minds, it would be much easier to accept their criticisms.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Does he accept that it is not especially surprising that, at the time of the Single European Act, a great many people from all parties did not know, and could not be expected to know, that it would be used as a vehicle for a massive programme of harmonisation, the effect of which would be deeply damaging to British industry?

Mr. Soley: It is entirely possible that they did not know, but one has to assume that such people were incredibly naive. One Conservative Member, for whom I have some respect, has said to me that he did not realise the implications at the time. At least he was straightforward about it. Harmonisation has always been the agenda of the continental European countries. They have never really hidden that. People have mentioned it at one time or another in the past 20 years, so it was not a secret. I think, however, that some people did not want to hear what was being said. One of the problems is Britain's ambivalence towards Europe.

I want to talk about the wider role of the United Kingdom because the Liberal motion is curious. The Liberals talk about widening the United Kingdom's role in Europe, but then focus on the narrow, although admittedly important, issue of the euro. There are many other important issues in relation to Britain's role in Europe and we ought to face them now if we are not to repeat the same old British mistake of addressing current and past issues instead of looking ahead to the shape and form that Europe will take in 20 years' time. We need to have a longer vision.

Perhaps I could put my comments in context, not by repeating what I have said on previous occasions in the House but by reminding the House of why Britain is ambivalent about Europe. It is important to understand why. At times, we say that Britain missed the bus, for example, at the 1957 conference at Messina, but we forget that Britain's reasons for being more ambivalent about Europe than almost any other European country have a good basis in reality. The first is that we are an island nation with a separate island culture. The second is that we have close links with the wider world, not only in the Commonwealth but in the English-speaking world. British people regard north America, Australia and other countries as closer to home than Europe. The third reason is, in a sense, a dying reason. Britain was the only major country in Europe not to be defeated and occupied in two world wars. That has produced almost a schizophrenic attitude among British people.

The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup and Lord Healey are two people who, having experienced the war, came to the conclusion that the best thing for Britain was to be part of Europe so that war was less possible. The other side of that argument, which is the one that I was brought up with as a child, was that Europe spelt trouble and that was the direction from which the bombers came. If we ignore the factors that cause Britain to have a somewhat ambivalent relationship with Europe, we do not do ourselves a service or help ourselves to move forward.

The wider issue that I want to talk about is the British role in Europe. It is true that we have missed the bus on a number of issues. It is true that, on the euro, we are behind the others, although, under my right hon. Friends in the Government, we are catching up rapidly. However, there are some areas of policy in which we can take a lead. I would have been more encouraged if the Liberal party had given more time to them. One such area is foreign policy.

[Mr. Soley]

The curious thing about European development is that, a few years ago, we took a leap that could have moved us towards dealing with some of the crises around the frontiers of Europe, which we had proved ourselves unable to do before without United States help. The classic example was Bosnia. Everyone in Europe looked on in horror at what was happening and said that it should stop, but did not know how to do that. We did something that to my knowledge we had not done before. We appointed in effect a special envoy in the form of Dr. David Owen. One can argue whether he was the best person for the job, but he acted as a special envoy. *[Interruption.]* I know that he was a problem for the Liberal party, too.

The tragedy was that, because there was no backing in terms of a European foreign policy or a defence intervention, Dr. Owen was unable to enforce what Europe wanted to enforce in Bosnia. The whole of Europe sat back in horror looking at what was happening in that former Yugoslav country and we were able to intervene only when the United States took the lead. That is the reality and we all know it. It was a formative experience for people who now think about where Europe will be in 20 years.

The Soviet Union has collapsed and there are a number of unstable states around the borders of the European Union. Will we sit back and do nothing when such situations develop again? Will we try to intervene in a way that enables us to contain the situation? Or will we simply call across the water to the United States and say, "Please come in and help"?

The ambivalence about Britain's role within Europe can be advantageous to us. We have positive and close links with the United States, and always will have. Those links are not equivalent to a special relationship in an academic sense; the special relationship is our common language, culture and history, which gives us an advantage. Although many Europeans resent it, quite a few of them recognise that Britain's relationship with the wider world—particularly with north America, which is the dominant world power—is positive and could form the basis of a more effective way of dealing with future crises.

I am sorry that the Liberals have addressed that matter only in the title and the tail-end of their motion. The frightening issue for Europe is not whether the euro will work, but what happens in Russia, and we all know it. Almost every Member of Parliament is concerned about whether Russia will remain a stable power or whether, to use a simplistic historical analogy, it is in the Weimar Republic phase. If it is, Europe had better have some way of coping with that.

We should think carefully about the proposal to re-introduce special envoys and appoint the first one to Russia to help the Russians to deal with their current problems in a way that preserves democracy in a country with no history of democracy, and no stability either. The development of the use of special envoys in areas where force is not needed to back up that initiative, the lack of which was a failing in Bosnia, could be a positive step forward in helping Russia.

The use of such envoys could also be considered in the middle east. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office has done a great deal to assert Britain's role there, but Britain has an interesting opportunity. We have knowledge of the Arab world's needs, and of the needs of Israel, and long and intimate involvement with both. Continental European countries are reluctant to get tough with Israel, not least because of the history of anti-Semitism in Europe. We do not carry that baggage.

The United States has a different position and, inevitably, is biased towards Israel. Britain and the European countries could operate a more even-handed approach between Israel and the Arabs. Until we achieve that, we will not get a peaceful outcome in the middle east.

There is a role for Europe and, more importantly, a leadership role for Britain. We should build on the special envoy approach and Britain's recent history as the world's dominant power to develop the European-style foreign policy, which recognises the separate parts of Europe, but also recognises the desperately important common interest in maintaining stability round the borders of Europe and dealing with questions such as Russia.

No hon. Member will sit lightly in the Chamber in five, 10 or 15 years if Russia has descended into authoritarianism and is a right-wing, nationalistic state with ambitions to reclaim the empire that it has lost. No one should underestimate the importance of nationalist feeling in Russia at the moment.

Mrs. Browning: I agree with a lot of what the hon. Gentleman has said, but I do not understand why it would be necessary for independent nation states to give up their sovereignty within the European Union to achieve a common foreign policy instead of doing so on the basis of agreement. That arrangement has worked within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation for many years. Why should states give up sovereignty, and why should we hand over power from this House?

Mr. Soley: This is a matter of pooled sovereignty, but, to answer to the hon. Lady, Richard Holbrooke, the United States mediator in the Balkans simply said, "The problem with Europe is that I do not know who to phone." It was impossible to get agreement within Europe about what to do, which is why a special envoy is important. We may not have been able to intervene with military force in former Yugoslavia because we did not have the necessary degree of agreement, but it is possible to intervene more diplomatically in areas such as Russia and the middle east without using military force.

We may decide to develop that potential. My view is that that is now inevitable, partly because of decisions taken by the previous Government to move Britain further into Europe. Whether we like that reality or not, we must face up to this issue: beyond the borders of the relatively small group of stable and democratic European countries, there is an unstable circumference towards which we must have a policy. We cannot go on ignoring that issue. I am sorry that it has not been addressed a little more in the Liberal motion, because we must take it much more seriously.

8.44 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Like the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley), I wish to deal with the second part of the motion—the character of the European Union.

Mr. Edward Davey: The right hon. and learned Gentleman does not want to discuss the euro.

Mr. Hogg: No, I do not particularly want to talk about the euro. I want to discuss what I think is more important—the essential character of the European Union.

Having participated in many debates within and regarding the European Union, I have reached the clear conclusion that, as it is currently constituted, the European Union is a profoundly undemocratic and unaccountable institution. I draw upon as much experience in that matter as anyone currently in the House. I have attended very many European Union Councils, including the Telecommunications Council, the Research and Development Council, the Industry Council, the Foreign Affairs Council and, most latterly, the Agriculture Council. I have also attended many ad hoc councils. Some general conclusions can be drawn from that experience; my most marked conclusion is that it is an extremely undemocratic process.

To illustrate that, I shall take the example of the Agriculture Council because that is the one that I attended most recently. The Agriculture Council's decisions impact substantially on Europe as a whole because of the budgetary implications. They also directly affect the interests of our constituents. The decisions that come out of the Agriculture Council—or any council, for that matter—are neither democratic nor accountable in the sense that this House understands those terms. Policy proposals are made by the Commission. They are often made late, a day or two before the hearing of the Council, without much external examination or inquiry. They are presented to Ministers, many of whom have only a slight understanding of the technical issues involved. The issues are discussed late at night and are the subject of fudge, brokered agreements and private deals. There is little accountability on the part of either the Ministers involved or the Commission for the decisions that are taken. That process is profoundly unsatisfactory and wrong.

What is true of the Councils is also true, to an extent, of the other EU institutions, whether the Commission or the Court. The Commission instigates legislation, but, if we were honest about it, we would recognise that there is no transparency about the process as a result of which it makes its decisions. There is secrecy in its deliberations and about its appointments, and almost no control over its activities.

I regret to say that the same is true of the European Court—and I speak as a lawyer. The court is in the business of driving forward the interpretation of treaties well beyond the point that is reasonable, and certainly well beyond the point ever contemplated by the treaty makers. Therefore, as representatives of an elected body and members of a democratic country, we must recognise that what we have created, and the body to which we give ever-increasing powers, is profoundly undemocratic and does not have the characteristics that we would expect of nations seeking to join the European Union.

That is a bleak summary, but it is not far from the truth.

Mr. Davey: I share many of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's concerns about lack of democracy and accountability in the European Union. What measures did his Government propose while he was in office to improve democracy and accountability in the European Union?

Mr. Hogg: I do not want to be diverted because this is a serious but short debate, and I want to focus on the major issues. I want to express the consequences of what I have tried to explain to the House.

We must ask ourselves, as representatives of a democratic body, either what can we do or what is likely to happen. We flatter ourselves if we ask ourselves what can we do, because, I regret to say, our ability to shape the future is remarkably slight. That being so, it is more pertinent to ask ourselves what is likely to happen. To start with, in an ideal world, two things could happen. I must say that I believe that neither will. One is that member states will be able to recover some of the powers that they have ceded to the European Union, and the other is that we shall be able to create effective democratic controls which satisfy the representatives of member states.

I do not believe that it is possible to recover that which has been given to the European Union. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) in her place. She will remember fisheries policy. That is but an illustration, and not direct in point. The fisheries regime is a disaster for British fishermen, but it is, in effect, impossible to undo. We created that structure and we are living with the consequences.

Mr. Bercow: I entirely agree with what my right hon. and learned Friend has just said. Does he agree that the protocol on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in the treaty of Amsterdam confirm the truth of what he is saying and make absolutely clear that the doctrines of the occupied field and of the acquis communautaire are unchallengeable?

Mr. Hogg: Yes, that is completely right. The concept of acquis communautaire is very important in this context.

The other question that I posed, to which I would like to respond, is whether it is possible effectively to create more genuine democratic controls in the EU. I am speaking only of the present; things may change and evolve. Let us be candid about what we are debating. Effective democratic controls can be created only if an effective Parliament, with powers that are analogous to member states' powers in their domestic assemblies, is created. I do not believe that that is possible at this moment for this reason: for there to be an effective Parliament, there must be an effective concept of statehood. There must be an identity of interest sufficient for people in the United Kingdom to accept the imposition of policies on which representatives of other member states vote, which they may see to be injurious to our interests. After all, it is difficult enough in the UK for the people of Scotland to accept the decisions of the United Kingdom Parliament, given that it can often be said that it represents the partial interests of England.

Mr. Davey: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hogg: Not quite yet.

[Mr. Hogg]

That being so, how much greater will it be to ask the peoples of the United Kingdom to accept the decisions, say, of the representatives of Greece, Iberian countries and Italy? I do not say that pejoratively; I am simply describing political reality. The conclusion is that, in the foreseeable future, we shall not have a concept of statehood—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I know that the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not mean any discourtesy, but he has a habit of turning his back on the Chair.

Mr. Hogg: I apologise; I was turning my back on you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I hope that you will forgive me. I was addressing my hon. Friends. The rebuke is accepted, and I am very glad that you have raised the point.

The point that I was making, if I may address you directly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that I do not think that, in the foreseeable future, there will be a concept of statehood, an identity of interest, that will enable us to create and put in place an effective set of democratic controls.

Mr. Davey: I have been following the right hon. and learned Gentleman's argument very closely. He makes an important point on whether we need a concept of statehood before we can move ahead with greater democracy in the EU. Will he reflect on the concept of statehood in the minds of those who drafted the federalist papers in the United States of America in the 18th century? Does he believe that they had a concept of statehood before they developed an agreement to work together for the economic and social benefit of their peoples?

Mr. Hogg: I do not believe that it is possible to impose an entirely integrated state on the peoples of Europe unless it is underpinned by consent, and I do not believe that consent would exist without a genuine sense of statehood.

I accept that the picture that I have painted is somewhat bleak, but I have not concluded that we should leave the European Union, although, in certain circumstances, I might reach such a conclusion. We should, however, ask ourselves what we should do, given a fairly bleak assessment of the facts.

First, we must communicate our anxieties to the peoples and Governments of Europe. They are well founded and worth communicating, and they need to be defended and justified as arguments. I do not believe that we should embark on any further policies to deepen the integration of Europe unless they are underpinned by genuine consent. I am thinking in particular of the single currency. Unless there is genuine consent in the country, manifested by the result of a referendum, we must not join a single currency.

In the European Union, there will be many occasions on which other member states wish to proceed with projects to deepen the process of integration, with which we do not wish to be associated. In such circumstances, we should stand aside and refuse to join. There will be a price to pay, in terms of less influence than might otherwise exist; but, ultimately, a judgment must be reached. Personally, I would accept less influence in the European Community rather than paying the price represented by the alternative—the loss of much more sovereignty in return for, perhaps, a little more say.

I view the future with considerable concern. What I have sketched is a bleak scenario. I believe that the process leading to greater integration is now irreversible; I do not think that the House, the Government or anyone else will be able to stand in its way. I think that the chance of effectively reinforcing the democratic restraints in Europe and creating democratic structures that mean something are very small, and I anticipate greater integration without proper control. At that point, there is a grave danger of disintegration. It may be triggered by the single currency: I believe that is precisely the sort of issue that might trigger disintegration. If that happens, the duty of Governments, of parties and of the House is to recreate arrangements that retain much of what is valued in the European Union, while avoiding the dangers that are inherent in a state that is too integrated and too closely combined.

I am against a united states of Europe, and I believe that the feeling of the House is against it as well I condemn the Government for smuggling the process in.

8.58 pm

Ms Tess Kingham (Gloucester): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. I, too, wish to concentrate on the latter part of the motion, which asks for an open, democratic and accountable European Union and open, democratic and accountable European institutions. In doing so, I shall focus on two separate but related questions. The first relates to the way in which the EU aid budget is allocated and prioritised; the second relates to the wider role of the EU. I agree with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) about the role of the EU in the wider world, and the need to ensure that peace continues in the Mediterranean and north African region. I think that the United Kingdom Government has a role to play in that regard.

Over recent weeks, we have all been disturbed to see the debacle in the European Commission and to hear the allegations that have been flung at specific commissioners, ranging from fraud and corruption to economic mismanagement. That is nothing new. It is perhaps on a scale, that we have not seen before, but there have been allegations of fraud in the past.

My recollection of past activities is different from that of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). Having been a Euro-candidate and concerned with European affairs for many years, my recollection is that it is Labour Members of the European Parliament who have always been known as the biggest fraud busters in the EU, and Tory Members of the European Parliament who have fairly consistently blocked and failed to support measures to combat EU fraud

One of the commissioners who has been under the spotlight recently has been Mr. Marin, a commissioner with responsibility for part of EU aid spending. That is a sector that concerns me considerably. I worked in the international development sector before coming into

Parliament. I am a great believer that much of the EU aid programme does much good, but there have been many questions about how the EU aid budget has been spent.

How is the budget spent? Is it transparent? Is it open enough? When the aid reaches its destination, is it effective? Is it well delivered? Those questions have hung around for many years. They are coming to a head at the moment.

One of the first things that the Labour Government did on getting into power was to produce a White Paper on international development. We clearly laid out our priorities for how aid should be spent. It was well received by almost everyone who has a role in international development. The Labour Government stated clearly that aid should be spent on eradicating poverty, and that the UK aid budget should be targeted on the poorest countries to help the poorest people—that aid should be prioritised for the poorest countries. We were also brave and right finally to untie our aid budget from trade and other domestic interests. I am sure that my constituents in Gloucester would assume that that was also the case in Europe. I am sure that they and taxpayers throughout the country would assume that EU aid is prioritised in the same way—that it goes to the poorest countries. I would assume, as I am sure that most of us would, that the major beneficiary of EU aid, the country that receives the most, would be one of the poorest countries.

Information that came to us at a recent public meeting of the Select Committee on International Development showed that that is not necessarily true. I was shocked by what I heard. There has been a monumental shift in relation to the country that receives the most from EU aid spending. That is something that the Government need to be aware of and that we should look into.

In 1986–87, the country that received the most from the EU aid budget was Ethiopia, which received $157 million; quite right—Ethiopia is a very poor country. In 1991–92, Ethiopia was again the top recipient; it received $257 million in EU aid. That is fine. It is just what I would expect. It is consistent with the UK's aid policies.

What about 1996–97? Which country would we assume received the most EU aid? I would assume that it would be a country such as Ethiopia again, Mozambique, Bangladesh or Rwanda—a country that has a very low gross domestic product and is one of the poorest in the world. Is it? No. It is Morocco. In 1996–97, Morocco was the top recipient of EU aid. How did that come about? Morocco shot up from nowhere to become the top country receiving EU aid; it did not even feature in the top 10 countries receiving EU aid in the previous 10 years.

I have a big question about how that happened and how Morocco has been prioritised in that way. I cannot believe that, all of a sudden, Morocco has dropped in the world rankings, ceased being a middle-income country and suddenly become one of the poorest in the world. It is obvious and transparent that the EU is prioritising its strategic interests over the needs of poor people throughout the world. That is not what I would call open, accountable and democratic practice.

If we allow such practices to continue, the EU will be prioritising trade policies, our own domestic interests and our interests in having secure borders ahead of using aid money as it should be used—to provide aid. The Government should be investigating the matter, and the United Kingdom could be playing a strong role in determining Europe's aid priorities.

Morocco is not only a middle-income country receiving EU aid, but is spending about $1 million a day illegally occupying Western Sahara. Therefore, while receiving EU aid money to the tune of $280 million a year, it is spending about $365 million a year illegally occupying another country. Allowing such a situation to continue does not demonstrate good, open, democratic and accountable governance in the EU, and hon. Members should be pressing the United Kingdom Government to make representations about it in EU institutions. The EU aid budget is intended not to serve the EU's strategic interests, but to help the poorest people in the world.

The EU should be flexing its strategic muscles and promoting good practice by trying to ensure that peace continues in the Mediterranean and north African region. The EU and its member states, including the United Kingdom, should be examining very closely a conflict that is brewing once again very near to our borders, in the Western Sahara. The Moroccan Government have not responded positively to a new peace package proposed by the United Nations. The mandate for the United Nations peacekeeping operation in Western Sahara expires at the end of this month, on 31 January.

I believe that the United Kingdom Government, the EU and the EU member states have a very important role to play in urging Morocco to move towards peace, and to accept and respond positively to the new United Nations peacekeeping package. If Morocco does not respond positively, the mandate will expire on 31 January, the United Nations is likely to pull out, the area is likely to tip back into conflict, and there is likely to be instability and devastation on the EU's doorstep.

The EU's strategic interests can be served best by ensuring that that part of the world has an opportunity to enjoy sustainable development and by ensuring that peace is maintained in the region. Building peace in Western Sahara and ensuring that it can develop with a sense of freedom would achieve those objectives.

The second part of the Liberal Democrats' motion urges the Government to play a wider role in Europe and not only to consider the effects of the euro. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush, I also urge the Government to ensure that we have peace in the areas bordering the European Union. Peace in Western Sahara is an important strategic matter for the EU. I also have some questions about the prioritisation of EU aid.

I should therefore like the Government urgently to deal with prioritisation of the EU aid budget and to urge Morocco to respond positively to the United Nation's peace package, so that we can help to achieve peace in the region, which would serve everyone's strategic interests.

9.8 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The wording of the Liberal Democrat motion accuses the Chancellor and the Government of being an absentee Government. I thought that the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) was rather unkind to the Chancellor in suggesting that he was absent for the euro's launch, on 1 January, because he was preoccupied with internal Labour party matters. I do not agree with that.

I thought that the low profile with which the Government approached the euro's launch was quite deliberate, and that it was indicative of something

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

described very accurately by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory)—the fact that the Government now have a policy of deceiving the British people on the euro.

If the Liberal Democrats were in a position to influence anything, surely it would be when they sat around the Cabinet table with their Cabinet partners discussing constitutional matters. I do not think that there is any disagreement in the House that a single currency is a constitutional matter.

The Liberal Democrat motion is a cry of frustration that the Government are not enthusiastic enough about giving up the pound—that they are not going about it fast enough. It is clear from what we have heard tonight that the Government intend to take the UK into the single currency and give up the pound. They are already printing the notes and striking the coins, so I have no doubt that they would like to do that. Regardless of what the Chief Secretary said, they are slow-pedalling for one simple reason: they have committed themselves to a referendum of the British people on the issue. Poll after poll tells the Government that a single currency would not find favour with the British people.

My local newspaper, the *Western Morning News*, reported on Friday 4 December the results of a readers' poll. It was conducted by postal ballot, so there was no chance of the result being rigged by people repeatedly dialling the same number, as we know that the Liberal Democrats tend to do in the west country—they have a good track record. Some 6,255 people said that they did not want to join the single currency—that was the question—and only 281 said that they did. With polls giving such results—a 96 per cent. no vote in that case—it is clear why the Government are slow-pedalling. They are not in a position to secure a yes vote, so they are back-tracking.

The paper says of the poll:

"North Devon Lib Dem MP Nick Harvey said he thought it reflected thought on Europe at the moment, but added that once the euro gets under way and there is a concerted campaign in the lead to a referendum, it would alter. However, he expressed grave doubts that any campaign could deliver a 'yes' vote in a referendum."

That is an acknowledgement from one of the Liberal Democrats' most senior spokesmen that the British people are not likely to support a single currency.

That is the Government's dilemma. They are committed and the clock is ticking. They have to attend meetings in Europe. They have to make sure when they are over there that they say the right things to their European partners so that they do not think that we will not come on board. However, back home, they do not know what to say—or, as we heard from the Chief Secretary, they select narrow elements of the subject because they are terrified of the British people hearing the truth and having a full debate. It is clear that the Government will not achieve the result that they want from a referendum.

The Liberal Democrats have an opportunity to discuss the issue when they sit down with the Government. I am a little mystified as to why they have brought it to the House. If influence means anything, a Cabinet table seat—of which they have four—is the place to exercise it. That shows their lack of real influence. Why do they continue to sit round the Cabinet table—I accept that they are nothing if not decorative—when they have been so let down by their Labour partners that they have to bring a constitutional matter to the House? I hope that they will press the Government on that next time they are round the Cabinet table. They should be more generous and understanding about the Government's dilemma.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Does the hon. Lady accept that the Liberal Democrats at least believe in open, political debate, and that sitting around a table—no matter where it might be—is no substitute for debate in this Chamber?

Mrs. Browning: Of course this is the place for open debate. The very substance of what I am saying is that the Government do not want open debate on the single currency because the more that the British people hear about the realities of what is at stake, the more we will get results such as we had in the west country last month.

I am normally quite critical of the Liberal Democrats, but they are lovable and consistent.

Mr. Edward Davey: And principled.

Mrs. Browning: I would not say that. The hon. Gentleman pushes me a little too far. They are consistent, however, and they would give up the pound tomorrow—as we have heard—and would rush us into union, which would create a country called Europe. They have some allies in the debate. Some big businesses—particularly the chief spokesmen of multinational companies—are also enthusiastic about giving up the pound.

Dr. Brand: What about the National Farmers Union?

Mrs. Browning: I will resist that temptation. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to give way, perhaps he might observe the customs of the House.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will in a moment, but I have been more than generous.

Big business is very enthusiastic about supporting the rush to join the euro. I can understand some of the frustrations in terms of forward planning that big business is now experiencing because of the Government's attitude. Some companies—particularly multinationals—are keen also on the harmonisation of business taxes and on allowing unelected bankers to set our interest rates.

We all understand that the euro is now operational and—like any of the 80 currencies in which we trade as a nation—there is no reason why we should not trade in it. I am not unrealistic about that. However, some big businesses will now be trying to persuade their smaller suppliers to invoice them in euros. Many small companies in this country who do not export and who did not think that they would need to trade in euros will find that there is enormous pressure on them from their larger purchasers—in the same way as large companies put pressure on small companies in terms of their slowness of payment of debt. That same pressure will be exerted by large companies in a trickle-down effect on subcontractors and suppliers.

That development is part of the strategy on which the Government are relying—one of euro-creep. We have had Euro-speak, and we now have euro-creep. The Government are relying on the belief that, given sufficient time—and as long as they keep their head down and do not address the key important points—there will be sufficient acceptance, familiarity and inevitability about the existence of the euro among many people who had not thought that it would affect them. The Government are relying on the British people deciding in a referendum on the basis not of informed debate and information, but of acquiescence over a period. That is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells was referring to when he described this as a policy of deceit.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Will the hon. Lady accept three points? If one is trading nationally and internationally, one wants to trade in the same currency—because that is sensible. If one's supplier companies are trading and pricing in the same currency, that is sensible—and, as we move into the European context, that becomes doubly sensible. Would not the hon. Lady, if she were an industrialist, like to pay 10 per cent. corporation tax, as in Eire, and a bank rate of 3 per cent. when she wanted to invest?

Mrs. Browning: I understand the need for individual companies to be able to choose the currency in which they want to trade. Is the hon. Gentleman telling us, from below the Gangway, that corporation tax is to be set at 10 per cent. under harmonisation? We would have preferred to hear that from a Minister at the Dispatch Box this evening. The Minister was reluctant to go into detail when pressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells so that we could have a substantive debate on the Government's policy for harmonised taxation.

The Government are in a state of denial about harmonised business taxes. Every time the subject is mentioned, they run for cover and try to change the language. If corporation tax is to be set at 10 per cent., let us have a debate on that on the Floor of the House. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is privy to information from Ministers. We pressed the Chief Secretary on the matter, but he was reluctant to discuss it.

As many hon. Members remarked in the debate, there is a price tag for what the Minister called the British economic interest in the context of a single currency. Again, that is a legitimate subject for debate. The Government deny that there is any constitutional price to pay for a single currency, but that constitutional price is beginning to frighten the British people. As the Minister said, there is a serious debate going on in Europe about the single currency, and constitutional as well as economic issues are under discussion.

The Government must consider carefully whether, in taking Britain into the single currency, as they clearly intend to do, they can persuade the British people by stealth or sleight of hand that there is no constitutional price to pay and that their everyday lives will not be affected. If the Government take Britain into the single currency under those circumstances, the backlash from the British people will have a devastating effect on the unity of the European Union of which the Government want to be part, and will tear this country asunder.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): My hon. Friend is right. There could not be a starker contrast between the transparency of the debate taking place on the continent and the opaqueness of the one going on in the Government. Is she aware that in the *Financial Times* today, Joschka Fischer is reported as saying:

"The introduction of a common currency is not primarily an economic, but rather a sovereign, and thus eminently political act"?

The position could not be stated more clearly than that. Why do not the Government come clean and acknowledge that that is what the whole project is about?

Mrs. Browning: Indeed. The German agenda for the presidency is to move that project along in the next six months. The Government would do well to consider the views expressed tonight by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who argued that the Government should recognise that the British people may be ignorant of the consequences and the constitutional price of monetary union. The populations of the member states may not be prepared to accept that determinations and decisions will be made by people who are not necessarily their democratically elected representatives. That is a potentially dangerous state of affairs, and the Government should not gamble with the prospect simply because they are in a corner, having promised a referendum, but knowing that the people would not support them.

I hope that I have shed a little light for the Liberal Democrats and explained why they are frustrated by the reluctance of their partners around the Cabinet table to move as quickly as they would like. I am sure that the Government would have moved much faster, were it not for the fact that opinion polls tell them that they are out of tune with the British people. The Government's plans are not in the interests of the British people. Unless they can guarantee that the British people can continue to have democratically elected representatives to speak for them on a range of issues including taxation, spending, defence policy and foreign policy, they will pay the price, and not only in electoral terms.

9.25 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Both the motion and the Government amendment emphasise the importance of a comprehensive economic policy to support business and to develop and implement that policy as part of Europe. Currency and the euro are extremely important issues, but so are policies that relate to investment, focusing investment and the interests of the regions. One of the Tory Government's legacies when they left office was the fact that not one region of the United Kingdom had a gross domestic product per head which could meet the European average.

Since taking office, the Government have managed to secure a major sea change in attitude. They have put jobs at the top of the agenda both in this country and in Europe. They have gone forward with a positive regional policy in a way that the previous Government refused to do. One of the consequences of the Conservative Government's refusal to accept regional policy was that the regions could not benefit fully from European policies that were based on reflecting the strengths of the regions across Europe as a whole.

In the 1980s and the early 1990s, local authorities had to come together and form their own partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors to ensure that they could

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

work directly with the Commission in attracting structural funds to develop and support industry and in developing policies to promote certain sectors of industry.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Ellman: No. I am sorry, my time is limited.

It was because of the initiatives that came from the north-west region, in working with other regions of Europe, that the PERIFRA and Konver funds were set up to support defence diversification. That initiative was able to assist so many jobs in the north-west.

One of the new policies that the Government have implemented is the acceptance of regional devolution. The development of regional development agencies together with regional assemblies means that we shall shortly have in place the mechanism to attract European funding and to shape the form of European regional policies so as to give maximum support to our areas.

The innovative Merseyside special investment fund has shown already how £5 million of European funding has attracted £15 million of private funding to support 1,100 jobs. That is only one sign of the support and benefit that has come from Europe.

I note that the Opposition have learnt nothing. They opposed our involvement in Europe, which meant that our regions did not fully benefit from European regional policy. They still oppose regional policy and regional development agencies. If the Opposition were to have their way, we would still not have that support.

Our new devolved regional structures mean that, for the first time, we shall be able to maximise the benefits of focused economic policies, putting together single regeneration budgets along with European structural funding based on the strengths and needs of our regional economies.

The questions of currency and the euro are important. It is to the Government's credit that they are to take a decision on timing in the national interest. It is important also that we recognise the differing needs of different regions in this country and create structures enabling us to make the best use of European funding by our active participation in Europe. That will enable us to shape policies for the benefit of the people, jobs and the generation of wealth.

9.29 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): We have had an interesting debate, including many interesting and thoughtful speeches. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury said little, but said it, as always, eloquently, which might fit in with the best possible job description of a Chief Secretary. The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) mildly castigated us for not extending the debate to wider issues. We should have loved to debate the common foreign and security policy, but we have done so before and shall do so again. We cannot debate every aspect of Europe every time a short debate is allotted to us. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Ms Kingham) made a fine speech on international aid, and the speech of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) was also good.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heath: I do not have time as there are only 15 minutes in which to sum up the debate.

Among the Conservatives, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory)—no longer in his place—concentrated on the important issue of fraud, to which I shall return shortly, and on which I share much common ground with him. His remarks on the euro I found rather more cock-eyed. All the Conservatives who spoke talked of the constitutional implications of the euro, and about how they are a bar to their supporting membership of the euro. If that is so, there can be no time limit to that bar. It is intellectual nonsense for the Conservatives to persist in the notion that they can simultaneously say that there is a constitutional bar, and that the timing forms part of their policy. That is as nonsensical as the Labour party waiting for Murdoch.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) spoke interestingly on the European Council. He recognised the point that we have made repeatedly about the lack of democracy and accountability there. I do not quite share his doom-laden view of the likely outcome of any reforms, but we must keep asking questions about that part of the European Union.

Mrs. Browning *rose—*

Mr. Heath: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) but she must be very brief.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman is most generous. May I clarify Conservative policy, which has been endorsed by a vote by our membership? When there is a referendum, either in this Parliament or the next—hence the 10-year period—we shall campaign for a no vote. Whether it is this Parliament or the next, if the people vote yes and we enter the single currency, any policy that follows will be academic, as the country will have been sold for 40 pieces of silver.

Mr. Heath: I absolutely agree that we need an early referendum that will allow the people to decide. I find it hard to be too harsh on the hon. Lady as she said earlier that the Liberal Democrats were lovable and consistent, neither of which words I can ever use to describe the Conservative party. I wish I could reciprocate, but I cannot.

I shall not dwell on the euro, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) has covered it, but we must not underestimate the many difficulties. A successful launch is one thing, but further difficulties will be experienced over the years to come. We want the Government to prepare for those difficulties, and to allow a choice to be made in the country. There is a gathering case behind those who see joining the euro as an essential part of Britain's economic future. We want an informed debate and the early consent of the British people to the

proposal put before them. The difficulty will come if matters are delayed to the point at which there is a self-defeating prophecy.

The second part of the motion suggests establishing a constitution for Europe. I am loth to use that expression, because it can be misinterpreted. However, our motion makes it plain that we are talking about defining and limiting the powers of European institutions, the constitutional relationship between the European Union and member states, and the rights of citizens. Most of all, we are talking about a European Union that is open, accountable, democratic and decentralised.

I am disappointed in the Government's amendment, which contains not a word about democracy, accountability or decentralisation. The problem is that the amendment was drafted in the Treasury, and no one sent it across the road for the views of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which surely would have wanted to say something about the structures of Europe that are not Treasury led. Such omissions would be a shame at any time, but they are a particular shame in this week above all weeks, given the unfolding crisis in Strasbourg and the clear demonstration of some of the basic problems that we have for many years identified in European Union institutions.

The difficulties that the Commission has faced go to the heart of the issue of accountability. This is a critical time for the European Union. Hon. Members may say that it is always a critical time for the EU, but it is one now because a strategic agenda is on the table, in which the Commission must be involved—whether we are talking about the introduction of the euro and its development, the problems and opportunities of enlargement, or the minor but important reforms that flow from the Amsterdam treaty. Astride that agenda is the Commission—its members and the advice that they give. That is why confidence in the European Commission is so vital and why we stress to such a great extent the need for the Commission to be more accountable.

That accountability does not exist. We cannot talk about the Commission being accountable while it retreats behind a facade of collegiate responsibility. We cannot do so when the only tool of remonstrance available to the Parliament charged with proper scrutiny of the commissioners is the nuclear option of sacking the lot. Also, we cannot talk about accountability while some Members of the European Parliament use a scatter-gun approach, slinging mud at every member of the Commission to make their point, when clearly there are omissions and commissions on the part of one or two of them.

When Jacques Santer was appointed—let us remember that he was the British Conservative nominee for the presidency—he talked about zero tolerance of mistakes in financial affairs in the European Union and he has talked about it again since. His control of the Commission does not engender much confidence in that approach; it is not zero tolerance, but simply zero. Last November, the report of the Court of Auditors was qualified for the fourth year running. Why? Because of

"systematic failures to apply requisite checks",

and because the incidence of financial errors was so high that the court

"has had to give an adverse opinion on legality and regularity."

It was also because £3 billion was fraudulently spent, or could not be accounted for.

What was Jacques Santer's reaction? He suspended the whistleblower. He castigated the Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson, when he had the temerity to suggest that all was not well. He then tried to bluff his way through by demanding a confidence vote, which I am sorry to say the socialist group connived at and aided and abetted. That was Santer's Christmas.

That is no way to run anything. If individual commissioners, such as Manuel Marin who is responsible for the budget, which, as the hon. Member for Gloucester said, seems to be out of control, and Edith Cresson, who is said to have abused her position because of the way she appointed consultants and others, can hide behind a spurious Cabinet responsibility, which really amounts to irresponsibility and unaccountability, we have to ask why. The buck has to stop somewhere. That is why our colleagues in the European Parliament will be pressing the censure motion on those two commissioners to a vote tomorrow; I hope that they succeed. I am told that they will receive the support of the Greens and the Gaullists, but it is likely that the vote will fail because the socialist and Christian Democrat groups have been persuaded by Mr. Santer and bullied and cajoled by their Governments into a compromise. I gather that British Tory MEPs will support the Liberal Democrat motion in the European Parliament tomorrow, and that several British Labour MEPs will also do so.

We have a Conservative group in Europe that cannot persuade any colleagues to join it in putting the Commission to an accountability test, and Labour is split because it cannot understand the tergiversations of Pauline Green when she tries to hide the Commission behind a cloak of procedure. There must be a better way to manage the European Union, and we must be in the forefront pushing for it. That is why it is so disappointing that our Government cannot lead a strategy to sort this out. One cannot be both a friend of Europe and a friend of fraud, incompetence and mismanagement. If one is for Europe, one must be for a reformed Europe. That is why accountability and democratisation are so important; they make reality out of the rhetoric.

Mr. Plaskitt: I want to give the hon. Gentleman an opportunity to clarify something important in the Liberal Democrat motion. Is it his party's position that the reforms to achieve the openness, accountability, democracy and decentralisation mentioned in the motion are a necessary condition for sterling's entry to the European currency zone?

Mr. Heath: The reforms are a necessary condition for a healthy European Union based on the principles of openness, accountability and democracy. I had hoped that Labour Members would share those with us as our objectives in politics. There is no difference between our objectives in Europe and in the United Kingdom. We are committed to the same principles of accountability, democracy and devolution of power to the lowest possible level. That is why we are so convinced that we must set a new agenda for Europe. We must find and persuade allies—they are there—who also want basic reform of the European Union to make it a reality.

I ask the Minister to show that the rhetoric, which I know is sincere in her case and in that of many of her colleagues, will be backed by action to make proper accountability in Europe a reality. We want assurances

[Mr. Heath]

that the rhetoric on preparing Britain for entry to the euro, and on the essential question that must soon be asked of the British people, will be backed by the actions needed to make it a reality.

It was said earlier that the economic cycle makes entry impossible, so we cannot even make the effort. The Liberal Democrats know that we cannot enter tomorrow. Which of us suggested it? However, we see the need to take action today so that the question can be asked tomorrow and we have the capacity to enter the day after. That must be the objective, both of this Government and of the Liberal Democrats. I ask the Minister to demonstrate that the leadership is in place to secure the necessary coalitions to make that a reality in Europe. I am sure that she will provide those reassurances.

9.44 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Ms Joyce Quin): As in any debate on European issues, many questions have been posed and topics referred to, including the single currency; fraud; EU aid policy—which was raised in a thoughtful contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Ms Kingham)—democratic structures in the EU; Agenda 2000; tax issues, and, of course, through all those contributions, how Members on both sides of the House viewed the Government's record since taking office.

I was disappointed that, in introducing the debate, the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) did not give the Government credit for their active and co-operative role in the EU from the outset. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) redressed the balance by talking of the many achievements in the European sphere that the Government have to their credit.

The Government's constructive approach was evident from the start in the way in which we approached and concluded the Amsterdam treaty. It is almost impossible to believe that a Conservative Government would have been able to conclude the Amsterdam treaty and agree to the improvements that we agreed with our partners, particularly with regard to social and employment policy, the environment, where we achieved a great deal, and continued and good co-operation on justice and home affairs issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Riverside mentioned regional policy. The Government have also been active in promoting the cause of openness and democratic debate in the EU, which is why I found so unconvincing the various allegations about the Government smuggling or trying to hide information—euro-creep, as I think it was referred to by one Opposition Member. We have had a good record on openness.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Given what the right hon. Lady has just said about her commitment to openness, will she now publish the British tax measures that are under investigation by the EU committee chaired by the Paymaster General? Will she give the House, either this evening or by letter tomorrow, a full list of the measures that are under scrutiny by the EU?

Ms Quin: I understand that much of that information is already available. I see hon. Members agreeing. Certainly, there have been accounts of the various measures that are under consideration. I commend the work done by my hon. Friend in leading the work of that group.

Furthermore, in considering openness, I want to underline what I said a few minutes ago. Having been present at the first-ever open debate conducted in the Justice and Home Affairs Council, which was at our initiative, I know how committed we have been to making more information available to the public than was previously available.

I also commend to hon. Members the work that we have done recently on the scrutiny of European business in both Houses of Parliament. In the paper that we have produced, we have outlined various ways in which parliamentary scrutiny of European business will be improved in the future, and how scrutiny will be extended to the second and third pillars in a way that did not exist in the past. I hope that hon. Members will welcome what the Government have done in that area and concede that we have been willing to share information not only in Parliament, but more widely.

The British presidency, too, had many successes to its credit, and was a period when it became clear how engaged British Ministers were with their EU partners, and how successful that partnership was turning out to be. During our presidency, we were pleased to preside over the start of the enlargement negotiations. After the presidency, we were also pleased that we got the beef ban lifted—again, something that the previous Government signally failed to do.

Hon. Members will see that, in the past few weeks, the Government have taken a great many initiatives with our European partners. The defence initiative resulted in the joint declaration with the French Government at the British-French summit at St. Malo. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Swedish Prime Minister recently issued a joint statement about specific ways of tackling social exclusion and raising that issue on the European agenda.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and his Spanish counterpart put out a joint statement on various aspects of employment and competitiveness, which was welcomed by our European partners. Last month, a joint statement was issued by the Prime Minister and Chancellor Schroder on taxation, which gave the lie to many of the unjustified scare stories on taxation in the British press in November and December.

Much of the debate, particularly the opening contribution, focused on the euro. I was disappointed that credit was not given to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and his colleagues in the Treasury for their work with business on preparations for the euro and, in particular, for dealing with the euro now that it is coming into force in such a large part of our internal market. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said that we have a strong interest in the success of the euro because it operates in our internal market. We recognise the efforts that countries made towards ensuring not only that they met the criteria but that they were able to launch the euro at the beginning of January.

My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary described fully the tests that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has rightly said are important if we are to be able to be part of the euro in future. I was surprised that the hon. Member for Gordon seemed to feel that those

tests were not relevant; they deal with issues such as employment, investment and sustainable convergency which are crucial to our economy and our country. We are actively working with industry in preparing for the euro. As I said, we have a strong interest in its success.

The Conservative position on the euro seemed to shift during the debate. That is significant, but perhaps not surprising given the contributions of Conservative Members, who were saying that the fundamental threats posed by the euro to sovereignty and political and constitutional considerations logically rule out euro membership for ever. I see that the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) is nodding. The Front-Bench spokesman, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), conceded that. He said that he was in favour of that position, and perhaps even announced a change in Conservative policy on the euro. It is no longer a question of postponing for 10 years any consideration of joining; in his view, euro entry is ruled out for ever on constitutional grounds.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The right hon. Lady must address what we said, not what she hopes that we said. Nothing my hon. Friends or I said can be interpreted as she is trying to do. We said that there are constitutional implications to the change that are deceitfully denied by the Government. Will the right hon. Lady take this opportunity to confirm that there are important constitutional implications involved in giving up sterling which ought to be considered in the decision to join the euro, because that is not stated in the amendment that she tabled?

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer certainly acknowledged that there are political and constitutional implications, but, in his statement last October, he also said that they were not of a magnitude to provide a constitutional bar to membership. That position was also reaffirmed by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary in his contribution this evening. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has just joined us. He clearly signalled that the constitutional and political implications of the euro were such that he could not contemplate joining it. He nods his head vigorously; so he does not support the policy that the Opposition spokesman has now grudgingly said that he supports, even though the right hon. Gentleman gave us the opposite impression in the debate.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Will the hon. Lady just acknowledge that the great majority of the British public, according to every poll that is taken, are on our side on this issue?

Ms Quin: I am not sure what the definition of "on our side" is, as there are obviously two distinct positions on the Conservative Benches. [HON. MEMBERS: "Three."] Three or possibly more, but, in this debate, two distinct positions have been articulated.

It is true that opinion polls do not show enthusiasm for the euro. None the less, if we believe that the euro is in our interests, there will be a referendum campaign in which the advantages and disadvantages are fully aired. That is another reason why I found unconvincing the charges that we were smuggling and being secretive about information about the euro. We are committed to holding a referendum. A referendum campaign is the perfect way to ensure maximum public open debate on the subject. It is a debate that I will welcome.

Some reference was made in the debate to tax harmonisation. We estimate that, far from Britain being isolated on that issue, at least nine countries in the EU do not support tax harmonisation leading to single EU tax rates. There are on record helpful statements that back up that view by leading politicians and Heads of Government in Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Greece, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. I see that the hon. Member for Gordon is nodding in agreement. I welcome what he said in clarification of his party's position on the issue, which is similar to our own. We uphold the need to proceed by unanimity on such matters.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Before the hon. Lady finishes, will she say something about what the Government have done to facilitate the enlargement of Europe and enable the countries of central and eastern Europe to join more quickly than they are able to do at present?

Ms Quin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I said earlier that I was proud that, as president of the EU, we launched the enlargement negotiations. I am enthusiastic, as the Government are, about enlargement. It is a tremendous opportunity for the European continent. We expect to remain a firm and key supporter of the enlargement process in the coming months. I am grateful for the opportunity to put that on record.

Many hon. Members mentioned the real problem of fraud in the European Union. I was somewhat disappointed at the party politics that were played on the issue. As a former Member of the European Parliament, I know that British MEPs from different parties have played an important role in tackling fraud issues. Lord Tomlinson has played a prominent role in bringing those issues to the fore and taking a hard line with the European Commission on them. The Opposition spokesman is guilty of selective amnesia in talking about the importance of whistleblowing. I seem to remember that the previous Government were opposed to any type of whistleblowing in the national health service.

Unfortunately, I have to bring my comments to a conclusion, but I should like to say firmly that the Government's agenda is pro-Europe and pro-reform. We do not argue that Europe has got it all right but, unlike the previous Government, we are committed to working with our partners to get it right to make Europe work and to make it work for Britain. Those are Labour's aims. We have already begun to achieve them and I believe that we will achieve much more in the months to come.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 42, Noes 281.

Division No. 33] **[10 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard	Breed, Colin
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy	Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Baker, Norman	Burnett, John
Beith, Rt Hon A J	Burstow, Paul
Brake, Tom	Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Brand, Dr Peter	Chidgey, David

Cotter, Brian
Dafis, Cynog
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gorrie, Donald
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Osten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Edward Davey.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Bert, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Tipping, Paddy

Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House recognises the importance to the British economy of continued membership of the European Community; welcomes the step change that the Government has made in its economic relations with the UK's European partners and the real benefits that constructive engagement has brought for Britain; commends the progress made by the Government in promoting economic reform in Europe as the basis for growth and job creation; welcomes the Government's ongoing programme of practical assistance to British business on the implications of the euro; commends the Bank of England and the financial services industries for the skill and expertise with which they managed Britain's part in the transition of 1st January 1999; and welcomes the Government's decision to make the national economic interest the key test for British entry to the single currency on the basis of five economic tests and that any final decision should be made by the British people as set out in the Chancellor's statement to the House of 27th October 1997.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

That the draft Industrial Training Levy (Construction Board) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 1st December, be approved.

That the draft Industrial Training Levy (Engineering Construction Board) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 1st December, be approved.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

RATING (VALUATION) BILL

Ordered,

That, during the proceedings on the Rating (Valuation) Bill, the Standing Committee on the Bill shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Ordered,

That Miss Melanie Johnson be discharged from the Select Committee on Public Administration and Ms Margaret Moran be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY BILL (PROGRAMME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Greater London Authority Bill—

Committee of the whole House

1. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House on Clauses 1 to 4 of, and Schedules 1 and 2 to, the Bill shall be completed in two allotted days and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the second day.

Standing Committee

2. Proceedings in the Standing Committee to which the remainder of the Bill is committed shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 12.50 p.m. on 30th March 1999.

Business Committee

3. Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply to proceedings on the Bill.

Business Sub-Committee

4. Resolutions of the Business Sub-Committee may include alterations in the order in which Clauses, Schedules, new Clauses and new Schedules are taken in the Standing Committee.

Procedure in Standing Committee

5. At a sitting of the Standing Committee at which any proceedings on the Bill are to be brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order or a Resolution of the Business Sub-Committee, the Chairman shall not adjourn the Committee under any Order relating to the sittings of the Committee until the proceedings have been brought to a conclusion.

Conclusion of proceedings

6. For the purpose of concluding any proceedings which are to be brought to a conclusion at a time appointed by or under this Order—

(1) The Chairman or Speaker shall put forthwith the following Questions (but no others)—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed (including in the case of a new Clause or Schedule which has been read a second time, the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill);

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown; and

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(2) Proceedings under sub-paragraph (1) shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to sittings of the House and may be decided, though opposed, at any hour.

(3) If, apart from this sub-paragraph, two or more Questions would fall to be put by the Chairman under sub-paragraph (1)(d) in relation to a series of Clauses or Schedules to which no notice of amendment has been given by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman shall instead put a single question in relation to those Clauses and Schedules.

(4) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

Supplementary provisions

7. In this Order "allotted day" means any day on which the Bill is put down on the main business as first Government Order of the Day.

8. If any Motion is made by a Minister of the Crown to amend this Order so as to provide a greater amount of time for proceedings on the Bill under paragraph 1 or 2 of this Order, the Question thereon shall be put forthwith and may be decided, though opposed, at any hour.

9. If any Motion is made by a Minister of the Crown to supplement the provisions of this Order in respect of proceedings on Consideration or Third Reading or on any Lords Amendments or any subsequent message from the Lords relating to the Bill, the Motion may be proceeded with, though opposed, at any hour and the proceedings, if not previously concluded, shall be brought to a conclusion three-quarters of an hour after they have been commenced.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Allerton Bywater

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

10.14 pm

Mr. Colin Burgon (Elmet): I am very pleased to be able to help put the village of Allerton Bywater on the national map as a result of being successful in securing this Adjournment debate.

Hoping that I will not sound too much like a geography teacher, I shall point out that the village of Allerton Bywater is a former mining village lying in the south-eastern corner of the Leeds boundary, overlooking the neighbouring town of Castleford. The colliery, which over 100 years was mainly responsible for the growth and development of the village, finally closed in 1992. Its closure was part of the last Government's vindictive closure programme.

The colliery, adjoining workshops and British Coal's administrative offices provided employment for about 2,000 people. All those jobs have now disappeared, with obvious knock-on effects for local shops and businesses. As a result—this is based on figures from May 1998—the village has an unemployment rate of 10.5 per cent., twice the national average and twice the Leeds average.

My links with Allerton predate the miners' strike of 1984-85, but it was during that great strike that I got to know the village well and made many friends. One of my abiding memories of that time is of being invited to join the local miners on their march back to work after the strike ended. The march finished in the colliery yard. I think it very fitting that the colliery site that loomed so large in the life of the village is now seen as a catalyst for the positive changes that will help to create a more confident future as we move towards the millennium.

Hon. Members can imagine my delight when, on 13 July 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister announced that Allerton Bywater had been chosen as a site for the second millennium communities competition—following in the footsteps of the highly acclaimed and successful Greenwich millennium village project. Building on that success, the Deputy Prime Minister asked English Partnerships to organise five or six further competitions in the English regions.

Included in the criteria for the second competition were requirements that the site chosen should comprise previously used land in order to meet the Government's brown-field and recycling agenda; that the site should offer a range of different challenges from an urban planning, environmental, sociological and technological perspective; that the site should have a waterfront location; that the possibility of what is described as retrofitting a scheme into an existing settlement should be considered; and that the site chosen should enable the recommendations of the coalfields task force report to be observed in the context of empowering the coalfield areas affected by pit closures to bring about their own sustainable regeneration. I would like to think that my charm, persuasiveness and brilliant ability to network were responsible, but I think that it was for the reasons that I have just given that Allerton was chosen.

The whole project—all the competition—presents a vivid contrast to the last Government's approach. This Labour Government are about social inclusion and social solidarity: they reject the idea that the fate of communities should be left to the whim of market forces.

I have no doubt that the Deputy Prime Minister has high expectations of the millennium communities competition in Allerton Bywater, and I know that the villagers, English Partnerships, Leeds city council and the advisory panel share those expectations. We all look to the successful scheme to act as a reference point for future development, particularly of brown-field land, and as an example of best practice for the regeneration, design and development of many other urban and rural communities throughout the country.

I am privileged to be a member of the advisory panel chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside, which has helped English Partnerships to assess the original 11 submissions from consortiums that wish to carry out the project. We are now down to the final three, and, after a period of community consultation in the village, the winning submission will hopefully be announced at the beginning of March.

The aspirations of the millennium communities competition that the winning submission will have to meet are stringent and demanding, and are worthy of mention as an illustration of the philosophy behind the project. First, the competing consortiums have been informed that they will have to develop a design philosophy of the highest quality. They will have to recognise that this is a project of national significance, and they will have to challenge much of the mundane housing design that has become typical of the British approach to house building over the past 20 years. That approach has given us development that lacks the community, social and cultural focal points that sustain life.

Secondly, there must be a mixed-use development of the 60-acre colliery site. The new plan for Allerton Bywater has to capture the essential qualities of a working village, best delivered through an appropriate mix of uses.

Thirdly, sustainability is central to the project. Targets will be set and will have to be achieved. The houses that will be built at Allerton Bywater will break new ground in more ways than one—they will be energy efficient. A target of 50 per cent. reduction in energy consumption compared with conventional housing has been set for the competition. Combined heat and power, solar energy, solar gain and the highest standards of insulation will all have to be looked at. On the basis of expectations at Greenwich, the aim is to reduce household waste in Allerton Bywater by 50 per cent. It may not be popular with the bin men, but there we are.

Many of those ideas and others that I do not have time to mention show what a progressive and forward-looking project the village will be involved in. Allerton Bywater will be a trail-blazer for the rest of the country.

The fourth aspiration is that it is of the utmost importance that the project must at all times acknowledge that

"integration with the existing village"

is central to the whole scheme. In a nutshell, we must ensure that we avoid sharp and divisive social and physical contrasts between the existing village and the new development on the site of the colliery.

That is a real challenge, but I am glad to note that the liveliness and involvement of people in the village is instrumental in helping us to face and meet that challenge.

We have in place a colliery site forum, which was set up by English Partnerships. I chair the forum. It facilitates public discussion and involvement in the question of pit-site development and related topics. I am pleased to note that two former members of the National Union of Mineworkers sit on the forum: Les Wigglesworth and Karl Curry, both of whom played a prominent part in the 1984-85 strike. The people who destroyed the coal industry have moved on, but those two men are still here, determined as ever to forward the interests of the community in which they live.

Many other organisations are involved in the village, but, unfortunately, time does not permit me to list them all. However, I must acknowledge that my meetings with the local regeneration group, organised by Ken Asprey, and the tenants and residents, organised by Ian Sambrook, have been especially valuable in keeping me informed of villagers' views. By May, we will have a newly formed parish council for the village. That should overcome any perception of a so-called democratic deficit.

From my wide discussions with villagers, I am able to tell the House that the priorities that are held by them are the priorities that are held by us all—they want better education, jobs and training and an improved physical and social environment.

It is recognised that people will need high-quality local education facilities if we are to make the idea of lifelong learning a reality. We hope to see improved community learning and study resources at both the village school sites, centred on an information and communications technology network. I am confident that, in the head at Brigshaw school, Peter Lawrence, and the head at Allerton Bywater primary school, Gill Weatherhead, we have two people who will give a lead in our quest to develop the concept of a learning village and a culture that values education.

With reference to jobs and training, people want workshops and office spaces to be developed on the site. They want to be able to work locally. I know that English Partnerships is actively considering proposals for employment. At a minimum, I hope that local people will benefit from the job opportunities that arise from the development work and that contractors will be required to use and to train local labour.

The ideas relating to an improved physical and social environment are wide ranging. As its name suggests, the village has a riverside setting and there is a widespread desire to maximise that undoubted asset in visual amenity and leisure terms. There is a recognised need to create a real village centre in what is, currently, a linear settlement with no natural focus.

Under active consideration are schemes to improve unadopted roads, tree planting programmes and improvements to sport and community facilities, with the emphasis on developing what is already in place. Traffic flows have created much discussion. We would all welcome traffic-calming measures in the village. I add that, in an attempt to improve links with the outside world, plans are afoot to put a bridge over the River Aire to the neighbouring village of Methley.

I hope that I have shown the exciting possibilities that have been opened by the millennium competition for Allerton Bywater. A positive step has been taken and local people overwhelmingly recognise that. We realise also that we have to have the continuing support of the Government. I therefore ask the Minister—who comes from an area that is similar to mine—to confirm, first, that that support will continue.

[Mr. Colin Burgon]

In summing up the lessons to be learned, the Greenwich competition briefing paper stated:

"Provision of Training/Health/Cultural facilities and programmes to create a true mixed-use community requires the full backing of a number of different departments willing to commit or top slice budgets to deliver a truly holistic solution."

Secondly, I ask the Minister to confirm that, when it comes to considering financial imperatives, the Government will sensitively balance also the village's social needs and desires.

Thirdly, I ask the Minister to pass on to the Deputy Prime Minister and to the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning an invitation to visit Allerton Bywater in the near future. I assure them that they will receive a friendly reception.

I have been delighted to show some of my London-based colleagues on the advisory panel round Allerton. Although I know that no hon. Member would question the implicit superiority of all things northern, I have been able to develop a better insight into the value, worth and attractiveness of Allerton Bywater by seeing it through fresh—London—eyes.

I can do no better in ending my speech than to quote the words of another visitor to Allerton Bywater, Dr. Francis Duffy, who is also involved in the millennium competition. In his message to the various consortiums competing for the work, he said:

"Consortia will recognise that this is an extraordinary competition intended by the Government to set new standards in the imaginative redevelopment of brownfield sites. They should also be aware of the need to respond sensitively to this very particular site and to the long established community that surrounds it. The village of Allerton Bywater has been shaped by the waterways, the colliery and the railway. The result is a markedly linear village. To the north is a fine, rolling, well wooded countryside. To the south a totally different, much more watery landscape. The village consists of clusters of houses, predominantly red brick, of varying forms and ages, some dating back to the Nineteenth Century and most with well tended gardens. In between are hedges, ragged patches of wood, allotments, churches and chapels, a few small shops, sheds, a cricket field, bowling greens and some fine Victorian school buildings—in other words the landscape of Industrial Britain that D. H. Lawrence described so lovingly. What is proposed should complement and regenerate this heritage rather than ignore it, or even worse, erase it."

I heartily concur with those words.

10.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Alan Meale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) on securing this debate on a subject that I know is of great interest to him and to many of his constituents. I should like also to pay tribute to him for his persistence—which he practises in the House whenever gets an opportunity to do so—in promoting the interest of his constituency and the areas surrounding it.

My hon. Friend knows the importance that the Government place on regenerating former coalfield communities and of our long-term commitment to making progress in that task. As he said, I represent an area that is similar to his own because they are both ex-coal mining areas. However, he may not know that I was born in another coal mining area, in the north-east of England, and lived in a colliery house for all of my childhood.

I should remind the House of the origins of the idea of building a millennium village at Allerton Bywater. As my hon. Friend said at the beginning of his speech, in July 1997, the Deputy Prime Minister told the Durham Miners gala:

"we had a duty to the coalfield communities to help them breath new life into their towns and villages."

A man of his word, to start the process, the Deputy Prime Minister established the coalfields task force, the remit of which was to identify and develop a specific programme of action to assist communities in England suffering from deprivation caused by the pit closure programme. As he explained at the time, that objective would be best served by pooling the expertise of Departments and other partners in the regeneration process.

As part of the research process that the Deputy Prime Minister initiated by creating the task force—I do not hesitate to pay tribute to its members, particularly under the fine stewardship of Paula Hay Plumb—the task force held five public hearings to listen to the views of local people. It also held discussions with key national bodies and Departments, and received submissions from more than 250 individuals and organisations. Unlike some research programmes, the task force also took the time to visit many of Britain's coalfield areas.

In June 1998, the task force produced an excellent and widely acclaimed report entitled "Making the Difference—A New Start for England's Coalfield Communities", which was deservedly well received and instigated a positive response from many interested communities, not just coalfield communities, throughout the UK. It recommended a programme of action, building on the work of the coalfields communities, and made recommendations for the Government to take forward.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, at the first coalfields conference, held at Ollerton miners welfare—not to be confused with Allerton—in Nottinghamshire, near my constituency, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister set out the Government's initial response. He said that we should take an integrated approach to coalfield regeneration to forge a new start for local communities, which would require a long-term approach. He also announced the establishment of two new national sources of funding for English coalfields: the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and the coalfields enterprise fund.

As my hon. Friend has pointed out, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister also announced that a millennium village would be built at Allerton Bywater in west Yorkshire. I shall return to that in a moment.

Following the initiation of discussions by my right hon. Friend, we spent four months considering each of the task force's recommendations in detail and prepared a comprehensive integrated written response to the report, culminating in the production of our report, "Making the Difference—A New Start for England's Coalfield Communities" in December that year.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, in partnership with colleagues from the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department for Education and Employment and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, set out a detailed, integrated, long-term programme for 10 years and more at a second coalfields conference at Peterlee in County Durham. To help achieve the objectives in the task force's initial report,

the announcement included a £350 million investment programme for the coalfields, together with details of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and the enterprise fund.

We much appreciate the positive and constructive response from the conference, which made us even more determined to deliver on our promises and to meet our obligations and duties to the people of the mining communities of Britain. The millennium communities competition proposal for Allerton Bywater is an important part of this delivery service, not just because of what it can do for Allerton, but to show, like the late, great Minister, John Wheatley, what this country can achieve in design, architecture and building of modern homes and communities.

My hon. Friend has spoken about Allerton from his perspective. I fully endorse what he has said. I am glad that he will be able to feed his views into the system as a member of the advisory panel that will help English Partnerships to select a consortium to take the work forward. I wish them well in rebuilding Allerton, which had a colliery employing 1,300 miners at its height and, as my hon. Friend pointed out, was probably responsible for more than 3,000 jobs in the community. Without the support that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has made possible, the community would have a heck of a job, because all that is left of the colliery is a largely derelict 60 acre site.

It might be helpful for me to give a little more detail about what we hope to achieve with the millennium village in Allerton. In doing so, I will try to address in detail the points that my hon. Friend has made.

In Greenwich—at our first millennium site, next to the millennium dome—we have set out to show what a community for the next century could be like. The Greenwich village will be sustainable, well-designed and have sensible arrangements for transport, in particular. The benefits of an urban village should not be confined simply to cities—or to London. We want to see them across all the English regions, and not just in the urban areas. We want to spread the benefits to rural areas too—areas such as Allerton Bywater, where we expect those involved in the project to apply the lessons learnt at Greenwich.

The millennium communities competition in Allerton has two main purposes. First, it aims to encourage the process by which developers are encouraged to design places where people wish to live, work, rest and play—a new community which is sustainable and uses the best of modern technology. Secondly, developers should demonstrate in their plans that a sustainable community can be turned into a commercial reality without public subsidy. Frankly, we believe that that is the only sensible way forward.

It will not be good enough to continue what has happened in the past 10, 20 or 30 years—much of which has failed the coalfield communities of Britain. We live in new times, with new requirements and new pressures. The English Partnerships brief for stage 2 of the competition pointed out that

"the Millennium Communities of Allerton Bywater will take its inspiration from the quality, vibrancy and unity of village life and match this with innovation in building design and sustainable development, as a model for 21st century communities".

An overriding theme of the competition is to demonstrate best practice, to take best practice forward and to demonstrate what can be done in the areas of energy efficiency, building technology, waste disposal and so on. It is important to provide effective, integrated local public services—particularly health—and to provide effective and integrated public transport. We want to see a 30 per cent. reduction in construction costs, a 25 per cent. reduction in construction time and—most importantly—0 per cent. defects at the point of handover.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, three consortiums have been shortlisted and invited to proceed to stage two of the competition to develop Allerton: they are Bellway, Aire Regeneration and Daniel Libeskind. They have been asked to submit detailed proposals to English Partnerships by 19 February this year. I understand that their outline proposals highlighted the need to support and enhance existing community facilities and the need to create new jobs for local people.

I am pleased to hear that discussions are continuing between the three consortiums and local authority representatives—an example of real community involvement in the revitalisation of their home areas. That factor is essential in delivering the regeneration of all the coalfield communities of Britain. We will also support communities to help themselves and, in that respect, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust will be happy to play an important role.

I am sure that the advisory panel and English Partnerships will look sympathetically at how we achieve the necessary balance between financial and social issues. The subject is being tackled also by the urban task force under the guidance of Lord Rogers, whose interim report was published today. We are looking forward to the final report in the summer, which will be taken into consideration as we develop our forthcoming urban White Paper.

Finally, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet for his kind words about the role of departmental Ministers—in particular the Deputy Prime Minister. My right hon. Friend has put a lot of work into this project, and he has held it up as an example of how the new Labour Government can deliver some of our manifesto promises. We will take a keen interest in the work of English Partnerships and the chosen developer as they try to deliver the objectives that we are seeking for Allerton.

Once again, I congratulate and pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is persistent in his endeavours to promote the rights and fight for the future of all the people whom he represents in his constituency. He sets an example to hon. Members on both sides of the House in his efforts to get the maximum advantage for his constituents. I thank my hon. Friend for this fine opportunity for a debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nineteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 14 January 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

New Deal (West Midlands)

1. **Mr. Robin Corbett** (Birmingham, Erdington): How many young unemployed people are taking part in the new deal in Birmingham and the west midlands. [64036]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Mr. Andrew Smith): At the end of November, there were just over 10,800 young people taking part in the new deal in the west midlands, 3,000 of them in the Birmingham area.

Mr. Corbett: Those young Brummies who have helped to make the dole queue the shortest for 19 years are delighted with the extra opportunities for training and jobs that the new deal is providing, and they do not understand why the Conservative party would deny them those opportunities. What further steps can the Minister take to assist people with disabilities to make maximum use of what the new deal has to offer?

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks about the new deal and its benefits for the young people of the west midlands and the rest of the country. A total of 52,500 young unemployed people are now in jobs thanks to the new deal, and of those, 5,500 are young people with disabilities. That is a great tribute to the work being done by all the partners in the new deal and our disability employment advisers. That help is in addition to the extra measures being taken through the new deal for disabled people.

The new deal is working for young people who are disabled and for the rest of unemployed young people in this country who, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, would have been denied those opportunities by the Conservative party.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): What proportion of those entering the scheme leave for other benefits or disappear from the scheme altogether?

Madam Speaker: Order. I remind questioners and the Minister that this is a limited question and it relates to the west midlands.

Mr. Smith: In the west midlands, as elsewhere, the number of those whose destination is unknown having benefited from the new deal is significantly lower than it was under the jobseeker's allowance regime introduced by the Conservative party. When we look at the cohorts of young people passing through the new deal, the number whose destination is unknown is as low as 12 per cent.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I wonder whether Birmingham and the west midlands are experiencing the problem that exists in my constituency, which is that, although the new deal is working successfully, some young people face multiple obstacles to employment. They are people who were previously referred to as being unemployable. They may have had drugs problems, they may be alienated or have been involved in petty crime. We are finding that, for such people, the gateway period is not long enough to prepare them for work. Even if they take up an option—

Madam Speaker: Order. I must be firm about questions. This is Question Time and the hon. Gentleman must not set the scene in his own constituency. If he wants to do that, he can put a question on the Order Paper. Will he come to his question for the Minister in relation to the west midlands?

Mr. Blizzard: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Will the Minister consider extending the gateway period or offering more support for young people in Birmingham and the west midlands who are finding it difficult to succeed properly in the new deal?

Mr. Smith: It is important to stress that the most disadvantaged young people, including those who have had drug problems, ex-offenders and those with severe literacy and numeracy difficulties, are getting jobs through the new deal. They are being given the help that they need in the gateway period. Of course, although the new deal is working well, it can always be improved. We have a continuous improvement strategy under way and that includes a more intensive use of the gateway services such as that urged by my hon. Friend.

Teachers' Pay

2. **Mr. Phil Willis** (Harrogate and Knaresborough): What estimate he has made of the effects on *(a)* local education authorities and *(b)* teaching staff of the staging of the last three pay awards for teachers; and if he will make a statement. [64037]

3. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): If he will make a statement on his Department's plans for expenditure on teachers for the current year and for each of the next three years. [64038]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): The impact of staging the teachers' awards over the past three years has enabled education authorities to meet the pay bill without even further reductions in the provision of services or investment in standards. The impact on teachers has generally been to irritate them. The Government recognise that and have done so in their evidence to the schoolteachers' pay review body for the coming year.

The investment programme for the next three years in the comprehensive spending review settlement has ensured that, over the next three years, there will be a

16 per cent. increase in real terms for education. There will be £19 billion of new investment for the next three years which, this year, means a cash increase of 5.7 per cent. to local authorities. In the years 2000 and 2001, as well as the external funding increases to local authorities, we have also allocated up to £1 billion to fund the proposals that are now out to consultation for the Green Paper on the reform of the teaching profession, to ensure recruitment, retention and motivation in the teaching profession in the years to come.

Mr. Willis: I thank the Secretary of State for that comprehensive answer and, in particular, for his admission that it was his intention to annoy the teachers. He has succeeded. The Liberal Democrats welcome the evidence that the Government gave the pay review body, which intended that this year's pay settlement would not be staged. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that is the Government's intention? Does he not feel that it is hypocritical of the Government to then cite the £140.7 million overhang from last year's pay award as an excuse to drive down teachers' pay this year?

Will the teachers have to pay for the Government's mistakes, or will that fall on the other services provided by local authorities?

Mr. Blunkett: The Government have not made a mistake. We have ensured that there are new resources to meet the challenge of the next three years. The school teachers' review body will of course have to take account—it is its job to do so—of the extra expenditure and other factors, such as the target inflation level. It is also the body's job to ensure that it takes account of recruitment and motivation in the teaching profession. We expect it to do that also. In our evidence, we recognised that our intention is not to phase the award. However, we shall have to wait until the award is announced, and consequently make a [illegible] based on the volume of cash and percentage [illegible] recommended by the body.

Mr. Rendel: Does the Secretary of State accept that staging over the past three years has effectively resulted in a 2.5 per cent. cut in teachers' salaries? Will not the first 2.5 per cent. of any increase recommended this year therefore do no more than catch up with a cut that has already been made?

Mr. Blunkett: No, I do not accept that. In the recommendations—I am responsible only for the most recent one—the STRB had to take into account the inflation rate, overall pay settlements in comparative sectors and affordability for local authorities. It would be quite useful if hon. Members considered events in the private sector and settlements across the country when making comparisons with public service pay.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): Is it not true that the teachers' pay structure does not reward experienced teachers for excellence in the classroom? Will not the Green Paper proposals deal with that problem?

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Current proposals, and the questions that have been asked today, deal with the annual round. However, we are talking about a restructuring, so that we are genuinely able to attract people into the profession, and so that they know that they will not only be reasonably rewarded when entering the profession but well rewarded as they move through the profession and gain experience—and as their abilities shine through in enhanced performance and lifted standards. The intention of substantial investment, with something for something, is to transform prospects for teachers and children in the years to come.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the factors demotivating teachers in the past 18 years has been the lack of recognition of their professional expertise? Does he agree that the proposals in the Green Paper will not only give higher rewards to good classroom teachers but enable teachers to extend their leadership roles in school and to develop their own careers? Is that not one of the best ways of motivating teachers and ensuring that they remain in the profession?

Mr. Blunkett: I entirely agree with that. Our proposals—which include substantial investment in establishing a leadership college, investment in head teacher training and the Green Paper's professional development proposals that can be taken advantage of by all teachers—will provide not only that motivation but the excellent skills that are needed. Those proposals in themselves will lift the teaching profession's self-esteem and confidence and help to encourage people of all ages to want to enter one of the most rewarding jobs that anyone can take up.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Secretary of State accept that the teachers' pay issue is one central factor, although it is not the only one, creating the severe teacher shortage—which amounts to almost 40 per cent. in subjects such as technology and mathematics, and 30 per cent. in modern languages? Will he assure the House that the deal on which he settles will be aimed at overcoming those shortages?

Mr. Blunkett: I hope that the proposals—not merely in the review body's report but in the Green Paper—will make a substantial difference in recruitment in the years to come. However, we have to get the matter into some sort of perspective. I do not want there to be talk of crisis in the education service when, across the United Kingdom, there are only 2,600 teaching vacancies—which is 0.8 per cent.—240 of which are for head teachers. It is important to remember that, although I accept that the position has worsened in recent years. That is why my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has announced a package of measures with the Teacher Training Agency, including £5,000 bonuses for maths and science graduates to come into the profession. We are also proposing radical changes for the teaching profession in our Green Paper—an issue that the Conservatives neglected for the two decades they were in office.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): The Secretary of State for Health has managed to recognise the crisis in the health service caused by the lack of recruitment of nurses. It is a pity that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is unwilling to recognise the growing crisis in our classrooms caused by a lack of teachers and problems of recruitment.

Whatever Government figures the Secretary of State gives, a recent survey by the National Union of Teachers shows that the real figure for teacher vacancies is—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I am fascinated to note that Labour Members greet mention of the NUT with such derision. Its survey shows that there are 10,000 vacancies—four times the number that the Government accept. Despite there being so many vacant posts, over Christmas the Secretary of State cut targets for teacher recruitment by 13 per cent. Does he believe that he can solve the problem of the lack of teachers in our classrooms by recruiting fewer of them, or is he just desperate to fiddle the figures to avoid failing to achieve yet another target?

Mr. Blunkett: The shadow Minister is matching the shadow Secretary of State in her enthusiasm to back the National Union of Teachers and, to mirror his words, to set up workers co-operatives running our schools. "Leave it to the teachers" is the new Conservative party slogan.

We are interested in a partnership with teachers. We want to support them and work with them to help them do their job. Nobody pretends for a moment that it would help recruitment, morale or standards for me to go round suggesting that there is a crisis when there is not. I was shadow Health Secretary for two years and I well understand what those in the acute services can present on television. We are ensuring that there is a plan for the future. We shall overcome recruitment problems, we shall raise standards and, above all, we shall make the teaching profession one that all people want to join.

Citizenship

4. **Mr. Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter): What plans he has to ensure that citizenship is taught in schools. [64039]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Charles Clarke): We will ensure that citizenship has a key place in schools in the new century, drawing on the advice from the advisory group on education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools, chaired by Professor Bernard Crick, which is helping to inform the current review of the national curriculum.

Mr. Bradshaw: I am grateful for that reply. How does my hon. Friend respond to my constituent, Christopher Hopkins, aged 9, who wrote to me recently? He said:

"I would like to know if you were planning to put politics in the national curriculum, as I find it very interesting."

Does my hon. Friend agree that if those in the younger generation are to have confidence in our political system and play an active role in it, they have to understand how it works? Will he immediately scotch rumours that Mr. Woodhead is trying to veto the sensible proposals to put citizenship into schools?

Mr. Clarke: Certainly, no one is trying to scotch or veto any proposals. We are taking advice from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and a wide range of organisations on the best way to put into effect the reforms that we are discussing. I agree very much with my hon. Friend's comments about the importance of teaching politics and the approach to political life and democracy in our schools. That is one reason why many politicians from all parties have supported the idea of teaching citizenship in some way.

Just to add another point, a primary school in my constituency is teaching philosophy. There has been a tremendous response because the interplay of ideas and arguments is such an important part of ensuring that children grow up to play a full part in society and in the community.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Does the Minister accept that perhaps the most important element of the teaching of citizenship is giving young people the thought that they can influence what happens in the world in which they are growing up? Will he encourage the growing number of schools that are taking seriously ideas from their pupils about the running of their schools and the work they can do in the community?

Mr. Clarke: I agree very much with the hon. Gentleman. Let me take the opportunity to commend his work in developing youth parliaments and other approaches to the teaching of citizenship. Schools councils have a great deal to offer. Although we have no intention of making them a requirement in the curriculum, they have assisted children from a young age to address precisely the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) and the hon. Gentleman have raised.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): With the welcome use of referendums by the Government, will the Minister take heed of the importance of sixth formers and those reaching the end of their school careers being adequately informed about the issues on which they may have to vote? I refer in particular to entry into the single European currency and the Jenkins commission report on electoral reform.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. Referendums on issues such as she has raised are an important constitutional development that requires citizens to be as fully informed as possible of the implications of decisions that they are being asked to take, which include important decisions about economic and monetary union, proportional representation and electoral reform, and the issues on which there have already been votes in Scotland, Wales and London. That is one reason why developing within the curriculum the idea of strong citizenship will help to produce a more informed democracy and better quality decisions.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Is not citizenship just one of a range of new curriculum topics that Ministers want to impose on schools? When will they stop? There are a host of them, including "values" and "environmental awareness". When will the Government stop their remorseless flow of instructions and directives to teachers and schools—what the Secretary of State has just called partnership? Does not the Minister understand that the 322 communications sent from his Department to schools and LEAs last year represent an impossible burden which is distracting teachers from delivering the national curriculum and raising standards in schools?

Mr. Clarke: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments on citizenship. The reform and review of the national curriculum is exceptionally important to ensure that it best reflects current needs. As the hon. Gentleman

said, the curriculum includes citizenship, sustainable development and personal, social and health education, because it is important that those issues be addressed. However, we are not imposing anything; we are undertaking a review and taking advice from a wide range of people.

I can only return to what I said earlier: some senior Conservative politicians acknowledge the need to examine the issues properly and would be rather shocked by the cavalier way in which the Opposition today simply dismiss their considerations.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Is it not irresponsible of the shadow Minister to suggest that Parliament should have no interest in what happens in schools apart from teachers' pay and similar issues? Does my hon. Friend recognise the role that his Department can play together with right hon. and hon. Members so that when we examine new ways of conducting our business to ensure democracy in the Chamber, in Committee and in local government, the issues are better understood in schools and colleges of further and higher education?

Will my hon. Friend help those of us on the Modernisation Committee to look at new ways of strengthening the interface between the younger generation and the democracy of which we are proud to be members in this House?

Mr. Clarke: I strongly support what my hon. Friend has said. I was fortunate enough to see the parliamentary website—which has been developed by the education unit of this House—at the British educational technology exhibition at Olympia yesterday, and that does precisely what my hon. Friend mentioned. I played around with the site, and saw how it was presented and working. All those in this House who are developing such education, so that young people can understand the nature of our democracy, deserve credit and thanks, and I pay tribute to those working on such projects.

New Deal (Young People)

5. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): How many Londoners benefited from the new deal for young people during 1998. [64040]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Mr. Andrew Smith): Latest figures to the end of November show that over 28,000 18 to 24-year-olds have benefited from the new deal in London.

Mr. Hughes: Those figures do not reveal that the outcome in London has been relatively poor. Given that Glasgow, the worst area in Scotland in terms of the new deal, is better than half of London; given that Liverpool has had a better outcome than two thirds of London; and given that the worst area in Wales in terms of jobs from the new deal has had a better outcome than all but three of the 20 areas in London, what will the Minister do to make sure that London as a whole has a much better success rate and, in particular, that my borough of Southwark—which is bottom of the league table—has a better success rate than less than 10 per cent. of those who go into the new deal coming out with jobs? In Southwark, the general view is that it has been a lot of money for very little product.

Mr. Smith: There would have been no product at all if the hon. Gentleman had had his way, because there would have been no new deal. He should not talk down the achievements of the new deal in London, which has placed 5,000 young people in jobs, 2,500 in full-time education and training and another 800 in the environmental task force and voluntary sector programmes. The hon. Gentleman should remember that London has 14 of the 22 most deprived local authority districts in the country, and that is why young people there particularly need the help that the new deal provides.

We have set up a business coalition for London, which is mobilising London businesses to help youngsters in the most deprived parts of the city. A continuous improvement strategy—focusing on job placement, job retention, qualifications gained and the satisfaction of young people and businesses with the new deal programme—will focus especially on what else can be done to improve the performance in London. The hon. Gentleman should not sell that down the river.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I am glad to hear the figures that my right hon. Friend has just given—particularly the fact that 5,000 young Londoners have found jobs as a result of the new deal. That is a price worth paying, and it reflects the fact that 52,000 other youngsters have found work through the new deal. Given that important fact—and knowing that social deprivation often comes from unemployment—does the Minister understand why the Conservative party is opposed to the new deal and that great success? If he does understand it, can he explain it to me, because I certainly do not?

Mr. Smith: It is incomprehensible. The Conservative party opposed the new deal at the general election—the Liberal Democrats opposed the means of funding it—and all they can do is repeat their catastrophic failure in terms of youth unemployment, and unemployment in general in this country, which left a whole generation neglected and its needs ignored. The new deal is bringing the help that we promised at the general election, and to have 52,500 young people in work only seven months into a new programme is a major achievement of which we are proud.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister confirm that the average cost per job of the new deal programme in London is £11,000, by comparison with £443 for a job obtained from a job club and £282 per job through the restart programme? Given that, only this week, we have witnessed among young Londoners between 18 and 24 a substantial increase in the number of those who have been unemployed for between six and 12 months, why does not the right hon. Gentleman cease to be so wet behind the ears and admit that the programme has been a colossal and expensive failure?

Mr. Smith: The figures quoted by the hon. Gentleman are a grotesque fabrication by his hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench. The true average cost of securing jobs through the new deal is about £1,000, and very good value that represents. It is money well spent, bringing

hope and opportunity to young people who would be denied them by the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends. As for the labour force survey statistics, they show that over 14,000 more young people in that age group have gained employment since the new deal started.

Youth Service

6. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): If he will outline his plans for the youth service. [64041]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. George Mudie): The Government see the youth service not only as carrying out its traditional tasks, but as constituting a vital partner in our vision of ending social exclusion and widening participation. A paper on the future of the youth service is in preparation, and will be available for consultation soon.

Mr. Hope: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. The paper is eagerly awaited throughout the country.

Is my hon. Friend aware that youth workers in Corby play an important and effective role in working in the community with the young people who experience the greatest problems—young people with problems related to drug abuse, young people who are perpetrators and victims of crime and young people who have left school with no qualifications? The youth service plays a critical role in helping those young people to return to the community. Will my hon. Friend devote all his energies and ability to giving the service new purpose and new leadership, so that it continues to be open to all young people and can target its resources and expertise on those who are most disadvantaged and most alienated from their communities?

Mr. Mudie: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, and congratulate the youth workers in Corby. As the House knows, last year we conducted and published the first national audit of youth service work. The details varied: some authorities spent just under £300 per youngster in their areas, but the amount fell as low as under £20.

I urge local authorities and those responsible for the youth service to see ending social exclusion, widening participation and returning youngsters to either education or work as a vital part of their job. They need not necessarily wait for the consultation paper, or for anything else to happen; they should get on with the job of refocusing and helping youngsters.

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): One obstacle in the way of the youth service in my part of the country is the Government's delay in producing national guidelines or an approved scheme to deal with the registration of youth workers and youth organisations, as proposed by Lord Cullen after his inquiry into the disastrous events in Dunblane. Can the Minister give us any idea of when the Government might introduce either United Kingdom or separate English and Scottish arrangements enabling local authorities to work together to produce an approved scheme that will allow more youth workers to be properly vetted?

Mr. Mudie: Vetting is a problem. I hear many requests from the youth service for statutory provision, but I am at pains to tell youth service workers and authorities—including local authorities—not to wait for legislation. They know the task that the Government have placed at the top of the agenda: ending social exclusion, an aim that is shared throughout the House. I urge local authorities, notwithstanding their wish for statutory backing, to get on with the job even before the publication of the consultation paper.

Given a record revenue support grant settlement and a very good standard spending assessment for education, there is little excuse for any local authority not to take the youth service seriously. I find it strange that local authorities and others who say that they approve of participation are not strengthening and refocusing their youth services.

Disabled People

7. **Mr. Tom Levitt** (High Peak): What measures he is taking to promote the retention of people in employment when they become disabled. [64042]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): My hon. Friend has drawn attention to an important aspect of our drive to help people with disabilities into the labour market. Clearly, it makes good sense to offer early help to people who, through disability, risk losing their job. The Employment Service already helps some 5,000 disabled people a year to retain their jobs and the new deal for disabled people will explore what further employment and training support is needed.

As part of the £30 million package of extra help that we announced in October, we are increasing the amount of help that is provided through access to work by £12 million over the next three years. I am also working with colleagues in other Departments and with the voluntary sector to ensure that all our policies work in tandem to help disabled people to remain in work.

Mr. Levitt: My hon. Friend is clearly aware that to assist a disabled person to stay in work enhances not only their dignity and income, but their productivity, and prevents them from what could be a lifetime on the dole. It must be frustrating for an employee in middle age to lose their job because of reduced dexterity and mobility or increased sensory impairment. I welcome the measures that my hon. Friend has described.

Will my hon. Friend assure the House that not only now through the agencies of the Employment Service, but in future through the Disability Rights Commission, the retention of disabled people in their current employment will be promoted wherever possible?

Ms Hodge: I am delighted to be able to reassure my hon. Friend on that point. I would particularly like to thank him for all his work in supporting civil rights for disabled people. Clearly, it makes good sense to try to keep people in their jobs, rather than to force them on to benefits and then to try to bring them back into the labour market, so that will be the thrust of all our policies.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): While I welcome what the Minister says, is she aware of the considerable difficulties experienced by the children who come out of a school such as the Pear Tree school in my constituency—which deals with children who have severe learning difficulties—in gaining a place in the employment sector in the first place? Will she undertake to study the matter and to look at the problems that are being encountered by the school in connection with further education, social services and the Employment Service? As a first step, will she to speak to the school's head mistress, Mrs. Jean Cooke, about her first-hand experience in that difficult area?

Ms Hodge: I give the reassurance that, if the right hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will look into the particular circumstances of the children who leave that school. I know that he has raised the matter previously with my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards in relation to the Green Paper on special educational needs. Clearly, it is important that young children with learning disabilities should be given opportunities in the labour market. Part of the new deal and our policies to open access to further education are geared towards ensuring that those opportunities exist.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will my hon. Friend give an assurance that Remploy factories, which have a tremendous history of employing disabled peopled, have an important part to play, in addition to all the other measures that the Government are announcing?

Ms Hodge: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that Remploy will have a crucial role over the coming period in ensuring that we provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities. We want not only to provide opportunities in its factories, but to ensure that we can progress people through the factory into open employment, so that we can start to deal with the discrimination that people have experienced in the labour market over many years.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the steps that have been taken, but sometimes it is difficult to get what might be available through to people who require that help. Is the onus on the individual, or are the social security officers being trained to give guidance to those with disabilities as to the benefits and aids that might be available?

Ms Hodge: I am working with my colleagues in the Department of Social Security to ensure that we get a joined up Government approach to ensuring employment opportunities for disabled people. I am also working with colleagues in the Department of Health, so that we can get that liaison going. We have special advisers in the Employment Service focusing on the employment needs of disabled people.

As well as educating those who work with disabled people in the public services, we hope to mount an information and education campaign among employers so that they can take advantage of the abilities that disabled people can offer in the workplace. The campaign will also encourage employers to open up job opportunities in their businesses to more disabled people.

New Deal

8. **Mr. Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover): What new measures he plans to introduce to expand opportunities under the new deal; and if he will make a statement. [64043]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): So far, 201,000 young people have entered the new deal programme and 52,500 have gone into work. In addition, we have introduced a new range of initiatives that includes the skills shortage pilot programme. Employers are able to access three quarters of the total amount available in subsidy if they are prepared to provide up-front, concentrated skills training. Also, 100,000 young people will benefit from the new mentoring programme, and the 28 new deal pilot programmes will help 90,000 people aged over 25.

All those measures mean that we can contribute to the phenomenal change that has taken place in the labour market. They also put into a reasonable context the opinions of the pundits about this week's figures for the number of people going into work and for the unemployment rate.

Mr. Skinner: Can I suggest another idea to my right hon. Friend? He, like many Labour Members, will be aware that the local authority is often the largest employer in areas of high unemployment, so why not make more use of those authorities to implement the new deal? Unemployment is excessively high in some of the old colliery areas. Under the new deal scheme, new training centres could be established and run in co-operation with those local authorities. That would ensure that, in future, there would be people to mend the roads, repair the schools and so on. That would be a useful approach, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will take it on board.

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend is right. In replacing the old skill centres, we must look imaginatively at how the national traineeships that we are developing this year and the modern apprenticeship programme can directly impact on the skills that young people need to get into work. I am happy to assure my hon. Friend that my Department will study the way in which the national traineeships and the Employment Service new deal can be linked to build on the success that we have achieved in the task that we face.

Since the Government came to office, we have halved the number of young people under 25 out of work, compared with the total that we inherited from the Conservatives. That total was 178,000, and is now down to 88,000. I am sure that Conservative Members, even without our new numeracy programme, can do the sums necessary to see that the total has been cut by 50 per cent. We will be able to do even more if young people acquire the skills and training that my hon. Friend advocates.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Does not the Secretary of State agree that, given the enormous resources that have gone into the new deal programme, it is important that the House can be sure that the scheme is working as well as the Government want it to? Does he recall that page 12 of the Government's specification for the new deal programme for young people aged between 18 and

24, tells potential contractors that at least 45 per cent. of people on options would move into subsidised employment? So far, that figure has totalled only 25 per cent. Does not that show that the new deal programme is not working as well as the Government hoped?

Mr. Blunkett: I am sure that that forecast was contained in paragraph 3 of page 12. However, I think that the hon. Gentleman has missed the crucial point, which is that the key to ensuring that the value-for-money precepts built into the new deal programme are achieved is that the programme has a target for unsubsidised employment. The gateway proposals on providing advice, counselling and social skills have enabled that target to be achieved and, in fact, exceeded. The latest figures show that we reduced the claimant count for that particular group by 5,000 in December alone.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): While I warmly welcome the fantastic news about the number of young people who are now in employment, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is crucial to bring on line as quickly as possible assistance for those over 25 and, in particular, for people in their 40s who find themselves unemployed? We must accept that manufacturing jobs are being lost. For example, at Ladybird Books in my constituency 200 people will lose their jobs and, as they have been working on machines that are more than 30 years old, it will be extremely difficult for them to find work. Can we ensure that assistance is given to them as quickly as possible, so that they do not have to wait to become long-term unemployed before they get help from the new deal?

Mr. Blunkett: I agree entirely that we need to be able to do that and I look forward to being able to expand on the pilot programmes that I mentioned, which will help 90,000 such individuals. It is a case not simply of the new deal, but of the whole programme from the Employment Service and the Department for Education and Employment, including the rapid response unit, which is moving in quickly where redundancies are declared, and working with the training and enterprise councils, employers and trade unions to ensure that we can immediately move those people into other opportunities for retraining or directly into jobs. Bearing in mind the fact that we face a challenge this winter, the success of that programme was exemplified in yesterday's figures.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The Secretary of State's claims for the new deal bear close scrutiny. In November, the Government said that they would spend £660 million in the coming financial year on the new deal. In December, the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities claimed for the first time, as he repeated this morning, that each new deal job cost £1,000. With the benefit of the numeracy programme, the Secretary of State should be able to work out that that means that there will be 660,000 long-term unemployed young people later this year. Either the Chancellor's economic policy is even more disastrous than I thought, or that £1,000 figure is complete nonsense. Which is it?

Mr. Blunkett: I was genuinely expecting more of an Oxford graduate.

Mr. Green: Answer the question.

Mr. Blunkett: I am about to do so. The calculations are sensible and take into account the fact that when someone gets a job he or she pays back into the Exchequer in tax and national insurance and thus contributes directly rather than drawing benefits. *[Interruption.]* It is no good hon. Members saying, "Ah!". Every time someone draws a benefit, he or she costs the state money. Every time someone pays tax and national insurance, it helps us to invest in stopping people being dependent on the state. New Labour stands for independence, dignity and self-reliance.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Will my right hon. Friend join me to pay tribute to the staff of the Employment Service in Northampton, who have been taking new deal road shows round shopping centres, especially in places with a large number of single parents? They have done so jointly with staff from the Benefits Agency and have provided good advice and opportunities to single parents under the new deal programme. Will he ensure that such schemes are extended to other areas because they are an exercise in joined-up government, they provide real opportunities to lone parents and they also ensure that staff in Government agencies are encouraged to show initiative and imagination in the way in which they develop such programmes?

Mr. Blunkett: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend and I congratulate those staff in Northampton who have developed that programme and worked together to make it successful. The child care initiative and the forthcoming working families tax credit, together with the announcement that the Secretary of State for Social Security and I made yesterday, which builds on the enormous amount of work that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities has done to draw up the gateway proposals, with advice, support, counselling and rehabilitation, will all contribute to making success a reality throughout the country.

Left-handed Children

9. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid–Worcestershire): What assessment he has made of the educational and training value of the video, "Left–Handed Children; A Guide for Teachers and Parents", produced in consultation with his Department and the Teacher Training Agency; and if he will make a statement. [64044]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The video can play a part in raising teachers' awareness of the particular issues surrounding left-handed children. I hope that it will be of use both for the initial training and the continuing professional development of teachers.

Mr. Luff: I thank the Minister for another constructive answer on this important but previously overlooked problem. I am glad that she agrees that the video produced by Mark Stewart and the Left-Handers Club of Great Britain and generously sponsored by the Post Office can play a part in improving teachers' awareness of this important issue. I am sure that she welcomes the fact that the Teacher Training Agency is sending the video to all providers of initial teacher training. What can be done to

ensure that teachers in nursery, first and primary schools are made aware of its existence and get a copy, and ensure that teachers and governors sit down and watch it?

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman is right that much progress has been made in acknowledging that the left-handedness of children is a factor in the educational development of some of them. I am pleased that he welcomes the fact that the Teacher Training Agency has agreed to fund distribution of the video to initial teacher training providers. Beyond that, it is for others to make it clear that the video is available. Ultimately, the allocation of resources for purchasing videos and other things is up to head teachers and governing bodies.

Mr. Michael J. Foster (Worcester): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Mr. Richard Buttle, the head teacher of Redhill primary school, his staff and the children, who took part in making the video? Does she agree that this exemplifies the high standards of teaching in that school and in Worcestershire as a whole?

Ms Morris: I am happy to do so and to confirm that the Teacher Training Agency has informed me that the video is of good quality. I extend my congratulations and thanks to all involved.

ILO Conventions

11. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): If he will review the UK's contribution to the implementing of International Labour Organisation conventions; and if he will make a statement. [64046]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Mr. Andrew Smith): We have been reviewing the conventions as yet unratified by the United Kingdom. I hope to be able to make an announcement shortly.

Mr. Mackinlay: I thank the Minister. May I remind him that there is a long list of unratified or unimplemented ILO conventions? I welcome what I think that he said about publishing the comments of the Government in respect of them all. Will he address with urgency the ratification of conventions 111 and 138, which relate to discrimination in employment and combating the exploitation of child labour? They are important and their non-ratification is causing us some embarrassment, especially in respect of the latter. Will he consider convention 137 on dock workers? Can we have early re-ratification of convention 26 on the minimum wage?

Mr. Smith: I share my hon. Friend's concern about the importance of those conventions and the desirability of the United Kingdom being able to ratify them. We took a leading role in securing the adoption of the declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work at the ILO convention in Geneva last June. The steps that we have set out in "Fairness at Work", along with introducing the minimum wage and signing up to the social chapter are significant strides forward for workers' rights and representation in this country. I hope to reach agreement shortly on signing up to convention 111 and also to convention 138 on the minimum age in respect of child labour. We have been working closely with other bodies in this country and internationally to stamp out the grotesque abuses of child labour.

Lower Class Sizes

12. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What representations he has received from school governing bodies with infant and junior classes about the effect of lower class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds on future classes for eight, nine and 10-year-olds. [64047]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Some governing bodies have sought clarification of the implications of the policy for junior classes. We have made it clear in our guidance to local education authorities that lower class sizes for infant pupils must not be achieved at the expense of junior pupils. We are providing £620 million for the pledge to be met fully and to ensure that resources are not diverted from other phases of education.

Mr. Bruce: St. John's school, Weymouth, wrote to me about a point on which I wrote to the Minister and on which she has replied to me. The school now has classes of 30 where previously it had had higher numbers. That means that the school's funding for the later years relies upon having larger classes to ensure that it gets the same funding. The school is concerned that bringing in lower class sizes will undermine its viability. It simply asks the Government to address the issue. This is important to a county such as Dorset, which is at the bottom of the standard spending assessment league table—the money that the Government say that it is allowed to spend. It already spends well above SSA in schools. The Government need to consider this important point because school governors are worried about the future of their school.

Ms Morris: I am delighted to tell the hon. Gentleman that schools now do not have to have huge class sizes in order to get extra money, as they had to do when his party was in power. It is clear that the school to which he refers and many others in his constituency and local authority will have money to reduce infant class sizes and will receive a share not only of the extra £19 billion that will be put into education over the next three years but, I suspect, of the 20,000 extra teaching assistants that will be funded through the standards fund. I know that the hon. Gentleman omitted to say, because of lack of time, that he very much welcomed the £0.5 million extra money that his area received to reduce class sizes last September and the reduction by more than 1,000 of five, six and seven-year-olds in Dorset now in classes of over 30.

Miss Melanie Johnson (Welwyn Hatfield): Will my hon. Friend develop further her comment about the 20,000 extra classroom assistants and their contribution, together with lower class sizes, to improving standards in our schools? How does she expect them to contribute to making teachers even more able to do the job that they are there to do?

Ms Morris: The extra 20,000 classroom assistants are one of the most important policies in the Green Paper on the reform of the teaching profession. For too long they

have been an ignored group of people. They contribute a great deal to standards in schools and among individuals. I am delighted that for the first time they can be assured of proper training and a proper place in the education of our children. I pay tribute to the good work that they have done and that they will do when there are more of them under this Government.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Does the Minister accept that a survey by another group of our friends in education, the National Association of Head Teachers—*[Interruption.]* They are all on our side now because they recognise the consequences of the rigid implementation of the Government's pledge on class sizes. The association shows in its survey that there are more larger classes in junior schools for eight, nine and 10-year-olds as a direct consequence of the rigid implementation of the pledge. Does the Minister not understand that schools also have more mixed-year classes and, despite what she said a moment ago, that there is still per capita funding for schools? Schools are having to turn away children whom they would have been happy to educate and they are losing funding as a result. Does the Minister not understand that that is a consequence of the rigid implementation of the pledge?

Ms Morris: I have never heard so much twaddle in my life. How on earth can the hon. Gentleman quote a figure in a survey and claim that there are more junior school children in large classes as a consequence of the infant school policy when the children educated in smaller classes cannot possibly have reached the ages to which he referred? That is absolute nonsense. The policy has not yet been enacted in full, but it will be in two years' time. The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He cannot change his mind since the general election and now claim that class size matters while he objects to every penny that we put in and every action that we take to deliver our pledge to parents and pupils. His local authority received £1 million of capital funding to reduce class sizes last September. It has gained from our policy. He and every other Member of Parliament will see five, six and seven-year-olds in classes of no more than 30 and junior school pupils benefiting from the extra resources put into education as a whole.

Reception Classes

13. **Mr. A. J. Beith** (Berwick–upon–Tweed): What estimate his Department has made of the number of four–year–olds in reception classes; and if he will make a statement. [64048]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): In January 1998, 350,959 four-year-olds were in maintained reception classes in England.

Mr. Beith: Is the Minister aware that in rural Northumberland, where successive local government settlements have left schools desperately underfunded, schools feel under pressure to take in four-year-olds to maintain their position at the expense of the viability of play groups? As there are so many four-year-olds, will there be a curriculum for them along the lines of the foundation key stage about which the Minister spoke before Christmas? Or shall we finish up with four-year-olds in sets, as recommended by the chief inspector?

Ms Hodge: What matters is not so much the setting in which a child receives that pre-school experience, but the nature of the experience itself and we are focusing on that. That is why we have asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for proposals to review the desirable learning outcomes. Like the right hon. Gentleman, we recognise that what count are skills in listening, speaking and working together, in persistence and co-operation. We shall pursue that agenda and there is no question at all, in anything that has been said, relating to setting.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Sir George Young (North–West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House tell us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows.

MONDAY 18 JANUARY—Opposition Day [3rd Allotted Day]

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate entitled "Rationing in the NHS", followed by a debate entitled "Pensioners and Dividend Tax Credits". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

TUESDAY 19 JANUARY—Consideration in Committee of the Greater London Authority Bill.

WEDNESDAY 20 JANUARY—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the whole House of the Greater London Authority Bill.

THURSDAY 21 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill.

Second Reading of the Scottish Enterprise Bill.

FRIDAY 22 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 25 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill.

TUESDAY 26 JANUARY—Opposition Day [4th Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY—Until 2 o'clock there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Second Reading of the Tax Credits Bill.

THURSDAY 28 JANUARY—Motions on the Social Security Benefits Up-Rating Order, The Social Security (Contributions) (Re-Rating and National Insurance Fund Payments) Order and The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order.

FRIDAY 29 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Sir George Young: As we meet today for the first time on a Thursday morning, as an experiment, can the House be assured that the new arrangements will be monitored by the Modernisation Committee, to help us to decide whether the experiment should be made permanent? Part of the Government's modernisation package was a constituency week in February. Will the Leader of the House tell us what has happened to that?

On House of Lords reform, can the Leader of the House confirm press speculation that the Bill will be published next week; will the White Paper be available in good time for the Second Reading debate; and will there be a statement to the House on the setting up of any royal commission on the constitution? Finally in relation to the House of Lords, I have asked on many occasions whether all the stages of the constitutional Bill could be taken on the Floor of the House. I have had no satisfaction, and the time has come for the Leader of the House to give a clear assurance that that convention will be respected.

On the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill, will the Leader of the House confirm that the key issues of conscience on the age of consent will be taken on the Floor of the House, and on a free vote?

Finally, may we have a debate in Government time on benefit fraud, to clarify the confusion that has arisen from certain assurances about resources given by Ministers on Monday which have been challenged both by local authorities and by Benefits Agency investigators?

Mrs. Beckett: I can confirm that it was quite explicit that the experiment—of which the first day is today—was indeed an experiment. The monitoring will be a matter for the Modernisation Committee, but in relation to conclusions, I should like to point out delicately to the right hon. Gentleman that, as we are only hours into the first day, it is a little early to worry about conclusions, although the House will rightly want to consider how we proceed on the matter.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked—I did not quite catch his question as someone was murmuring in my ear—about a potential non-sitting week in February. I remind him that I said during our debate about the experiment that I was not able to give an assurance that it would be possible to find time in the present Session. The Government are mindful of hon. Members' wishes to have a clear picture of the path of Government business and debates and consideration in the House in the months ahead, and to receive notice of when decisions may be made. However, the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the Government face a great deal of heavy business at present and that this part of the Session has barely begun. I cannot, therefore, at present confirm that we will feel able to put aside time in this Session, although we shall obviously keep the situation under review.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the handling of legislation to reform the House of Lords. The Government hope to publish the Bill and the White Paper next week—so, yes, we intend to provide proper time for hon. Members to study both the White Paper and the Bill. As the right hon. Gentleman said, he has raised previously the issue of whether all the Bill's proceedings should be taken on the Floor of the House. I have said before that the Government intend to respect normal conventions and that the matter will be discussed through the usual channels. That remains our position. The right hon. Gentleman need not feel the unease that he expresses.

The right hon. Gentleman also referred to the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill. That matter can be discussed through the usual channels, but the Government at least intend to recognise the fact that it is in some ways a matter of conscience. I anticipate that that recognition will underlie our decision, but we shall discuss the matter through the usual channels.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked me to find time for a debate on benefit fraud, consequent on earlier exchanges. I am not immediately familiar with those exchanges, but I shall undertake to draw the right hon. Gentleman's observations to the attention of the relevant Ministers. I cannot, however, undertake to find time for that debate in the near future.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): As chairman of the all-party Latin America group, I wish to know whether there will be a statement next week—possibly from a Treasury Minister—about the implications of the bank crisis in Brazil. Furthermore, will there be a statement before my Adjournment debate on Monday 25 January about the French proposals in relation to Iraq and the lifting of sanctions? Will my right hon. Friend and her colleagues look favourably at my ten-minute Bill, the Military Action Against Iraq (Parliamentary Approval) Bill, which asks simply that there be a formal vote in the House of Commons regarding any further bombing of Iraq and that any such action be supported by a two-thirds majority?

Mrs. Beckett: I recognise the concern that my hon. Friend has expressed about events in Brazil and I understand his wish for that issue to be raised with Treasury Ministers should matters develop in a damaging direction. I understand that my right and hon. Friends, together with others in the international community, are doing all that they can to ensure that there is no crisis in Brazil of the kind that might lead to demands for a statement. My hon. Friend will have seen that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is on the Front Bench, and she will certainly bring his views to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

My hon. Friend asked also for a debate about the French proposals regarding sanctions. That matter is being considered internationally and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has discussed it with the French Foreign Minister. We are looking carefully at those proposals, although I am sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that they raise other difficult issues. It is not clear that we shall be able to make a statement on those matters before my hon. Friend seeks to raise them again.

My hon. Friend also asked about his ten-minute Bill. I take his point on that, but the Government strove to keep the House as fully informed as we possibly could about how matters were handled, and we continue to do so. I am sure that my hon. Friend, like all Members, while wanting the Government to keep the House fully abreast of events, would not want us to do so in a way that would jeopardise our armed forces.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): First, when does the Leader of the House expect the Government to make proposals for the implementation of the recommendations of the Neill committee on the funding of political parties? What arrangements will be made for the House to be kept informed and to have an opportunity to debate those proposals?

Secondly, will the right hon. Lady arrange for the Foreign Secretary to make a statement next week on the serious breakdown of confidence between the European Parliament and the European Commission, which touches the interests of the country and the House? She will have noted that the Liberal Democrat Members of the European Parliament and their group are the only people to resist the Commission's attempts to blackmail the Parliament into submission and that the Socialist and Conservative groups are now split and have been bought off.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Liberal Democrat group is not big enough to split.

Mr. Tyler: It is bigger than the hon. Gentleman perhaps realises. Can we have an urgent statement that includes Government proposals for improving accountability in the European Union?

Thirdly, the Leader of the House may recollect that in July I asked her predecessor about proposals to charge our constituents and others who visit the House during the summer recess. I raised that issue again in a debate on 16 December, and there is now early-day motion 145.

[*That this House is opposed to the introduction of charges for the admission of visitors to the Palace of Westminster.*]

I understand that the other place has decided that it would be inappropriate to restrict by the considerable charge of £6 or £7 our constituents' access to Parliament. Will the Leader of the House urgently consider the issue and give the House an opportunity to debate it before any decision is made?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not in a position to tell the hon. Gentleman how speedily the matters on the Neill report will proceed. I shall find out whether it is possible to tell him and, if necessary, write to him and copy my reply to other hon. Members.

The hon. Gentleman referred to events in the European Parliament. He made a passing comment of enlightenment to a Conservative Member, and he is correct to say that the European Parliament group to which the Liberal Democrats belong is large. However, I utterly reject, as most other hon. Members will, his suggestion that only the Liberal Democrat MEPs and their group are concerned about the management of affairs in Europe or about fraud. The Christian Democrat group and the Socialist group have made it plain that there is a need for strong measures to improve the financial management of resources in the European Union, which, along with the need for close scrutiny, I understand to be the burden of the resolution that has been carried.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the significance of the Liberal Democrats' group being the only one to vote, I presume, for the dismissal of the Commission, that suggests that it is the only group in the European Parliament irresponsible enough to have done so. He ought to bear that in mind.

I cannot read my notes. The hon. Gentleman referred to Government accountability on another issue. Will he refresh my memory as to what it was?

Mr. Tyler: Charging.

Mrs. Beckett: Fine. That is a genuinely difficult issue because every hon. Member would be concerned at the notion that access to the House would not be free to our constituents. However, the request that was made and is being considered by the relevant House Committees—it has not yet reached the House of Commons Commission—related to the building being open during the recess when it is anticipated that large groups may wish to tour. Obviously, this brings costs to both Houses, and I think that the Accommodation and Works Committee was striving to balance the costs incurred in

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opening the building more fully to visitors with the question of access. It is a difficult issue, which I understand will arouse great sensitivities in this House as in another place. The proposal has not yet come before the Commission. No decision has yet been taken, but I have taken note of views already expressed to me from all parts of the House.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I am wholly opposed to charges in any circumstances.

Is my right hon. Friend aware of the deep concern about the fact that while we are waiting for the outcome of the inquiry into the circumstances of Stephen Lawrence's death and what occurred afterwards, the one police officer who was to have faced disciplinary charges is taking early retirement? Does she not think that we should have a statement? Is my right hon. Friend further aware of the deep distress felt first and foremost by Stephen Lawrence's parents and of the general feeling that the police officers who acted wholly inappropriately are escaping any form of disciplinary hearing? What has happened in this case—the previous Government refused to take any action, but the present Home Secretary of course set up the inquiry in this Parliament—remains a cause of great and continuing concern.

Mrs. Beckett: First, I thank my hon. Friend for reinforcing so promptly my remarks to the effect that there is clearly concern among all parties about charging for entry to Parliament.

Secondly, of course, the whole House understands and sympathises with the sense of frustration felt by the Lawrence family about the long-term effects of the way in which the tragic attack on Stephen Lawrence was handled. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be considering the matter in the light of Sir William Macpherson's report. I know that my hon. Friend will be looking for opportunities to raise this matter in a variety of ways and at some length, and Home Office questions are to be held on Monday.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): When the Leader of the House constructively answered my question on 3 December about the procedural consequences of devolution, she made no reference to her own memorandum dated 24 November. Although the Government have now postponed the first operational date for the Northern Ireland Assembly from 1 February to 11 March, time remains extremely short. Will she confirm that the memorandum went to the Procedure Committee in late November and was not delayed until the middle of December, which is when it first became known to the House at large?

Mrs. Beckett: Frankly, I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that I cannot quite remember when the memorandum went to the Procedure Committee, but it was certainly some time ago. I did not refer to it when he raised the matter with me because it was in the hands of the Committee; and I understand that it has now been put more fully into the public domain. I am sorry, as I know the Committee will be, if the right hon. Gentleman feels that it has held things up. I cannot quite remember when the memorandum was passed to the Committee—time flies—but if I have anything to add, I shall write to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): Will my right hon. Friend arrange an early debate on millennium compliance, as the millennium is now fast approaching and in view of the fears expressed by TaskForce 2000 that some systems will simply not be ready in time? May we have an early debate so that we can identify any problems that remain?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot promise my hon. Friend such a debate in the near future. However, it is not only TaskForce 2000 which has been dealing with such matters—it operated under the previous Government—as a range of organisations, including Action 2000, is now doing the same and is continually seeking to ensure that as many people as possible, especially those involved in small and medium-sized businesses, begin to tackle the problem. It would be quite a task to try to identify all the areas that might not be completely ready. I do not think that anyone in any organisation anywhere in the world will be able to say with absolute confidence that he is wholly ready. As this matter is studied more fully and in greater depth, the dimensions of the potential sources of difficulty unwind and the greater the problem seems to be.

It would be for the good of all, nationally and internationally, if everyone in public life raised these matters with their local authority, with small businesses in their constituencies and with all those with whom they come into contact. The first step is to prioritise the action that needs to be taken, to take as much of that action as possible, and for people to make contingency plans for unforeseen developments.

Sir David Madel (South–West Bedfordshire): As a former Minister in the Department of Education and Science, the right hon. Lady has always taken an interest in the education service. She will know of the excellent work of the Office for Standards in Education in strengthening and supporting the teaching profession. However, Ministers in the Department for Education and Employment seem silent on this matter. Could we have a clear statement next week? Do the Government and the DFEE support Ofsted and the chief inspector in their valuable work?

Mrs. Beckett: Frankly, I am a little surprised by the hon. Gentleman's question, especially as we have just had education questions. The Government work with Ofsted. We want everything possible to be done to raise standards. That is the task of Ofsted, and in that sense we work well together.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): Has the Leader of the House seen the press reports that suggest that the Government are considering the introduction of regional Committees? Will she comment on that? Twice last year, I asked my right hon. Friend's predecessor to recall the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs, which, although it has not met since 1978, could be recalled tomorrow. At its first meeting, it could discuss the economic opportunities facing north-east England.

Mrs. Beckett: We are very keen to recognise the need to take account of the regional dimension in England. We

are conscious of the view held by many hon. Members that the interests of the English regions have to some extent been overlooked in recent years. I intend, I hope in the very near future, to put some proposals before the Modernisation Committee on the use of procedures of the House that allow for a Standing Committee on the English regions. It may not be in the form implied by my hon. Friend's question, but it would be in a form that would, I hope, be of assistance to the House.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): The debate to follow is about public accounts and the National Audit Office. Will the right hon. Lady find time in the near future for a debate on the work of the Audit Commission, particularly its assessment of county councils? Is she aware that East Sussex county council pays private sector residential care homes less than any other county council? It pays £12 per week per resident less than the Department of Social Security's recommended rates, because its social services department subsidises its own more costly beds to the disadvantage of the private sector. Is that an appropriate subject to raise in a debate on the Audit Commission?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman would be able to raise that matter in a debate on the Audit Commission, but I cannot find time for that in the near future. I hear what he says, and I was not aware of the issue. As I understand it, the council is controlled by the hon. Gentleman's party, so he could use other means to raise the matter.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I again ask my right hon. Friend for a debate on the lending practices of the banks? In particular, we should discuss the outrageous conduct of the National Westminster Bank and Lombard Banking, including the way in which they have treated the Tanning Shop franchisees nationally. That subject is known to hon. Members. When we finally have that debate, I shall be able to argue the case for Mr. Robert Munn and Mr. Peter Stern to be questioned about what really happened inside National Westminster Bank and about the outrageous and almost dishonest treatment of many of the bank's clients.

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware of my hon. Friend's great concerns about this matter. As he said, he has raised the issue with me before and I understand the anxieties that he has expressed. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future, but I recognise that it is a matter that he may continue to raise

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): On Monday, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) and I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), certain questions about the adequacy of resources for pursuing benefit fraud, and for an undertaking that there were absolutely no cuts taking place in that matter. In view of the cases that have been cited in three eminent newspapers this week, will the Leader of the House ask the Minister to come back to the House with an explanation for a reply that was at best misleading but potentially baseless?

Mrs. Beckett: That matter was raised earlier and I said then that I was not aware of the concerns mentioned by Conservative Members. I will draw those concerns to the attention of the relevant Department. All I would say is that it is sometimes dangerous to place too much reliance on stories that appear in newspapers.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Can my right hon. Friend find time for an early debate on the successful launch of the euro so that the House can have an opportunity to discuss the implications for our economy over the next three or four years, as well as the continuing bitter divisions and splits that still exist within the Conservative party on that issue?

Mrs. Beckett: I greatly respect the interest that my hon. Friend has taken in these matters over many years. However, I believe that the divisions in the Conservative party are diminishing as the rampant anti-Europeans take control. I agree with my hon. Friend that the euro has been launched successfully. He will recall, as I do, the many occasions on which the idiots on the Conservative Benches said that it would never happen. [HON. MEMBERS: "Withdraw!"] I spoke in the heat of the moment, Madam Speaker; of course I withdraw that comment. I shall seek other words to describe my concerns. The folly of what was said does not cast light on the wisdom of the hon. Members who have made such remarks.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her gracious remarks.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): This week, Kent Members had a briefing from Kent police, who have made it abundantly clear that the public perception that the bootlegging that goes on across the Channel is causing crime is grossly understated and that, in fact, major crime syndicates are moving into Kent and changing the whole nature of the crime prevention policy. Can we have a debate on that serious issue from a Government who, after all, took office on the basis of being tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime? This is one of the most blatant causes of crime and it goes a great deal wider than any benefit that the Treasury might be deriving from a difference in duty.

Mrs. Beckett: I share the concern expressed by the hon. Gentleman—as I am sure do hon. Members in all parts of the House—at the way in which that fraud is being exacerbated and offering an opportunity for crime. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will take an opportunity to raise those concerns with Treasury Ministers. However, he will know that it is not a simple matter to make major changes in the structure of our taxes and duties. Indeed, Conservative Members are usually calling on the Government to be careful about how we do such things. There is certainly great consciousness of some of the difficulties that are arising and the Government keep the matter under active consideration.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): The BBC has told us today that we are entering a new phase in the Lib-Lab deal with the meeting later today of the joint consultative committee with the Liberal Democrats to discuss foreign and defence policy. Given that the papers will be classified and denied to Labour Members and the fact that we are all becoming weary of the endless speculation about Lib-Labbery, where it will take us and what

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precisely is in the Prime Minister's mind—*[Interruption.]* I say this in all seriousness—will the Leader of the House prevail on the Prime Minister to make a statement to the House next week on the Lib-Lab deal, the constitutional implications and precisely where it is all leading us?

Mrs. Beckett: I am very clear, as I think that all hon. Members are very clear, about what is in the Prime Minister's mind—to continue making successful progress on the Government's policies, which have led, for example, to 100,000 children in smaller classes, 200,000 people taking advantage of the new deal and the creation of 500,000 new jobs since the Government came to power. My hon. Friend asks about the use of a Committee to discuss various issues with the Liberal Democrats. Yes, it is intended that that group will consider some foreign and security policy issues, along the lines of previous discussions on constitutional matters on which there is genuinely common ground and agreement. It is sensible for people to work together on such issues. My hon. Friend has attended business questions today and will have noticed that there are a great many issues on which the Government and the Liberal Democrats diverge, as I am sure that Liberal Democrat Members will be happy to confirm.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): May we have a reprint of the list of ministerial responsibilities? The current one dates back to October and seems to be showing some signs of attrition. Will she also confirm that the remedy of impeachment is still available to this honourable House?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall certainly draw to the attention of the relevant authorities the hon. Gentleman's request for a reprint of the list of ministerial responsibilities. I shall refrain from commenting on his other remarks, as all sorts of comparisons spring to mind of people misusing such remedies for partisan purposes and doing their country no good in the process.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Following the Government's decision to pay compensation to GCHQ workers, will my right hon. Friend make time in the House for a debate on employment rights? Does she agree that such a debate would give Conservative Members an opportunity to apologise to loyal hard-working people who were sacked for no reason other than that they wanted to be members of a trade union?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I anticipate that, as the Government proceed with their legislative programme, there will indeed be time for a discussion of employment rights. I share his view that the treatment of workers and former workers at GCHQ was shabby and contemptible. I am glad that the Government have had the opportunity to put it right.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Will the right hon. Lady prevail on her colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to come to the House for a debate on the reasoning behind the closure of the Royal Hospital Haslar? If she cannot do that, will she prevail on her colleagues at the Department of Health to come to the House for a debate on how they will fund and provide adequate health services to cover the population of Greater Portsmouth? There is widespread concern across half a dozen constituencies about the future of health provision in the Greater Portsmouth area.

Mrs. Beckett: Hon. Members will be able to ask questions in Defence Question Time, in just over a week. The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to raise the issue on that and on other occasions with my right hon. and hon. Friends with responsibility for health and defence issues. I cannot promise a special debate on the problems of hospital provision in his area, but he may like to take advantage of the opportunities that arise for hon. Members to apply for Adjournment debates.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that the United Kingdom's assisted area status map is being redrawn. She will also be well aware that, before Christmas, there was a small opportunity for a debate on the subject, although many hon. Members were frustrated in that debate. Will she provide an opportunity as soon as possible for another such debate, so that I can make the point to hon. Members that it is vital for Thanet, which has the third highest unemployment level in England, to retain full assisted area status and objective 2 status? Will she, please, provide that opportunity?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot undertake to provide an opportunity for a debate on that in the near future, particularly as we had a debate on it only recently, as my hon. Friend kindly recognised. I understand and share the frustration that is always felt by some hon. Members when there is not time for everyone to be called. However, I am confident that my hon. Friend will seek other opportunities to make his point.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Leader of the House may be aware that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has recently begun a nationwide consultation exercise on reform of the common agricultural policy. Does she agree that, to avoid discourtesy to the House, it would be proper for there to be a debate in Government time on the reform package? So far, the Minister has not consulted the House. He is giving the impression in the country that what farmers say will have far more influence than will really be the case. It is time that the House had an opportunity to probe the Minister on that important subject and to give its view on the reforms.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman is being uncharacteristically ungenerous to my right hon. Friend. It is right, sensible and wise for us to encourage those involved in UK agriculture to put forward their views. I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman would agree and would play his part in encouraging that.

Mr. Jack: A debate?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course there will be opportunities for Members of Parliament to make their points of view known, but when that debate eventually comes—I cannot promise one in the near future—it will be better informed if those in the industry have had an opportunity to make their points fully. It makes for better government if people are encouraged to put forward their views early in a

discussion on reform rather than waiting until Government views have gelled more fully, without the advantage of that input of information and advice. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will encourage the farming industry to respond to my right hon. Friend's appeal.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Can we have a debate soon about town planning and unitary development plans? I refer in particular to a long-running planning application in my constituency for an outrageous 400 houses at Warren lane, Gilstead in Bingley. The proposal has raised several issues, including whether privatised water companies such as Yorkshire Water can withhold information about drainage networks from local councils on the grounds of commercial confidentiality and the woeful inadequacy of the Conservative Government's town planning legislation, which did not give residents the ability to shape the outcome of local planning decisions properly.

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with my hon. Friend's concerns. All hon. Members are conscious of the enormous impact of planning decisions and how fiercely fought they often are locally. My right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have the issues under consideration and review. I am sure that they will take on board my hon. Friend's comments.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I should like to draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 182 on council tax benefit subsidy limitation:

[*That this House deplores the unfair anomaly of relatively low income council tax payers subsidising the payment of council tax benefit that is to be introduced by the Government through statutory instrument and the Local Government Bill; condemns the totally unacceptable principle that the poor should subsidise the poorest in this way; regrets that the matter will not be subject to full parliamentary scrutiny; and urges the Government to reconsider this unfair and ill-considered measure.*]

Early-day motion 150 is similarly about limitation of housing benefit and council rents. Does the right hon. Lady agree that it is important that we should have an opportunity for a proper debate on the Floor of the House about the Government's intention to introduce a new clawback of council tax benefit subsidy? The issue should not be sent to a Committee and dealt with through secondary legislation and regulations. It is a fundamental issue of the poor paying for the poorest. The Conservatives introduced that principle when they were in government. Why are the Labour Government copying them?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the handling of local government subsidy matters. I am confident that his concerns are part of the consideration of my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. However, the House decided that many matters of detail relating to the implementation of Government decisions and the handling of issues such as benefit subsidy should be taken away from the Floor of the House. That decision was taken because it was believed to be for the better management of Government business. I am confident that the hon. Gentleman will have opportunities to raise the issue, but I fear that I cannot promise an early debate.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): May I ask the Leader of the House for a statement on fraud and nepotism in the European Union, so that hon. Members can seek assurances not only about what the Government are doing about such problems with their apparently new-found influence in Europe, but that they will never give up the rebate that was negotiated by that great British patriot, Margaret Thatcher?

Mrs. Beckett: We have made clear from the outset, not only in government but in opposition, our strong opposition to fraud and our concern at incompetence and fraud in the handling of public moneys, particularly in the European Union. It has been made clear repeatedly from the Dispatch Box and everywhere else that the Government have no intention of giving up the rebate. As for the pretence that only the Conservatives defend the interest of the United Kingdom, they may have got the rebate, but they gave up the veto.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): Following the pertinent concerns of the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) about the financial crisis in Brazil, will the right hon. Lady grant the House an urgent debate on foreign affairs so that we can discuss that crisis and the associate Mercosur country next door, which is being jeopardised by the Government raising the political temperature there and deterring the inward investment on which it depends? I refer of course to Chile.

Mrs. Beckett: As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said, the handling of the economy of Brazil is a matter for the Treasury rather than for the Foreign Office, but I repeat what I said earlier: the Government are concerned to ensure that no such crisis arises. As for the hon. Gentleman's later remarks, he will be aware of the House's ruling on matters that are sub judice and I do not propose to respond to his attempts to raise them.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Will the Leader of the House make a statement to the House next week accepting the kind offer of Mrs. Elizabeth Filkin, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, to look into the affairs of Ministers in the same way as she looks into the financial and other affairs of hon. Members? Does she agree that it would be particularly appropriate in the light of recent revelations that the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, accepted a loan from the former Paymaster General of £373,000 which he could not repay, to pay for a house that he could not afford at the time when his Department was looking into the affairs of the former Paymaster General, and that he failed to inform the permanent secretary? Would that not also be appropriate because of the further revelations in *The Times* today about Lord Donoughue, a Minister in the other place, who was also financially involved with that crook, Robert Maxwell, who robbed the Maxwell pensioners? If the

[Miss Julie Kirkbride]

Government are determined to be whiter than white as the Prime Minister once said, would it not be appropriate to accept the offer?

Mrs. Beckett: That was a very long question; indeed, it was more of a dissertation, the core of which was the question whether the Government propose to take up the offer made by the new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Of course it was sensible for Mrs. Filkin to say that she was prepared to take on the matter, but the hon. Lady may or may not be aware that the Neill committee is looking again at how such issues are handled, reassessing what we have learnt from experience. It is a matter of consideration and judgment. I am not persuaded that it is quite the right way to handle those matters for the parliamentary commissioner to take on that role—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) could stop heckling, as I do not think his wife needs any support from him.

In my view, different issues can arise involving the conduct of Ministers and what happens within Departments that it might not be right for the parliamentary commissioner to explore. It is genuinely a matter that needs to be considered without the need for knee-jerk and immediate results. I have some reservations about whether it is Mrs. Filkin's role, although the matter will be examined.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Leader of the House will be aware that, as a result of the changed timings of Thursday sittings, there will be a motion tonight to change the sitting next week of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee. Could she explore why an understanding that the Northern Ireland Grand Committee would meet at least once or twice in Northern Ireland last year was not kept up—and will not be kept up this year unless there is a change? Is it because 25 Labour Members of Parliament do not want to travel there, or is there some other reason?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised. If there is a feeling that an undertaking that the Grand Committee should meet in different places has not yet been fulfilled, that will be of concern to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I undertake to draw the matter to her attention, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): As a follow-up to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), may I say that it is not true that the Liberal Democrats agree with the Labour party about all constitutional issues? There are differences between us on devolution, there is a very stark difference about what is to happen in the House of Lords after the first stage, there are without doubt differences on defence and there are certainly differences on foreign policy. Frankly, some of us are fed up to the back teeth with the Liberals wanting to have their cake and to eat it. It is high time that a message was passed to the Prime Minister, or anybody else, that it is time to put a stop to it. I am old enough to remember the Lib-Lab pact leading up to 1978, and it ended in tears. The Liberals ratted when it got too hot, because they could not stand the heat in the kitchen. We do not want a repeat performance—sack the lot of them.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I might not please you, Madam Speaker, if I were to venture to comment on many of my hon. Friend's points. I accept that there are issues—particularly constitutional issues—on which the Liberal Democrats and ourselves do not see eye to eye. What I intended to say earlier was that, where there was agreement, it was sensible for that to be recognised. However, I fully understand that there are many areas where there is not agreement—including on some of the issues to which my hon. Friend referred.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Leader of the House consider arranging for a statement next week by the Minister for the Cabinet Office on the lack of progress towards the introduction of open government legislation and, in particular, whether it is still intended that such legislation should include protection for people who blow the whistle on secret abuses, bearing in mind the very sad case of Mr. Charlie Whelan, who has recently lost his job merely for blowing the whistle on secret abuses by two of the Prime Minister's Cabinet cronies?

Mrs. Beckett: The Government have every intention of producing for scrutiny our proposals about freedom of information, and we are giving careful consideration to how they can be effective. As for Mr. Charlie Whelan, I thought that the one thing that nobody had ever accused him of was operating in secret.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Leader of the House find time for an early statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which would enable him to commit the Government to publishing a White Paper on the implications for our democracy of possible British entry to the European single currency?

In that context, is the right hon. Lady aware of the erroneous claim made last night by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that the Chancellor's statement to the House on 27 October 1997 had addressed the constitutional issues? Will she confirm that it did nothing of the kind, but simply stated that there were constitutional issues but no constitutional bar? Does she agree that a White Paper dealing with the role of central banks, the power of national Parliaments, the health of our democracy in the future and related issues is the very least that we should guarantee our constituents?

Mrs. Beckett: The Opposition raise that issue continually, and I see no reason why we should provide time for yet a further debate on it in the near future. I have no doubt that there will be many opportunities for the publication of relevant Government documents at the right stage, and perhaps, in the fulness of time, even a White Paper; but I fear that I cannot promise the hon. Gentleman a White Paper, a debate or anything else next week.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): May I return to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride)? Does the Leader of the House recall that, only a few weeks ago, she told the House that we should trust the then Secretary of State for

Trade and Industry to be able to make his own correct judgments about conflicts of interests, and potential conflicts of interests? In the light of events, does the right hon. Lady not feel rather let down? Does she not feel that it would be helpful to the Neill Committee, the Government and the House to have an early debate on ministerial accountability, and the fact that, at present, Ministers are the sole judges of whether conflicts of interest exist? As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove pointed out, the issue is made more pertinent by revelations about the involvement of a junior agriculture Minister with the Maxwell empire.

Mrs. Beckett: I think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) has eminently justified what I said about his recognising where conflicts of interests arose. He has acknowledged that he made a mistake, and he has paid the price—unlike Ministers in the last Government.

Mr. James Paice (South–East Cambridgeshire): Last week, the Government published figures showing that the tuberculosis outbreak in our cattle herds is still exploding, and is now doing so at an even faster rate. May we have a debate on that as a matter of urgency, so that the Minister can explain to the House why, just over a year after the Krebs report, only six of Professor Krebs's proposed 30 study areas have been identified, and the study has already been suspended in the case of two of those six because of a lack of resources? That means that the British tuberculosis-free status is now in jeopardy, as are hundreds of farmers' livelihoods—especially given the fact that the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has said repeatedly that this is a crisis second only to the BSE crisis.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot promise a debate in the near future, but I am aware of the concern in the industry. Concern has also been expressed in the Ministry, and I shall draw the hon. Gentleman's comments to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The right hon. Lady was unable to find time for a debate on bank lending practices, but might she find time for a debate on building society lending practices? Would that not give us an opportunity to understand how the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) was able to sign a Britannia building society application form—happily, I have a copy with me—on which he certified that he had

"not arranged any other loan"

in connection with the property? As we now know, he had arranged a loan from the former Paymaster General. Would not the debate enable us to understand why the right hon. Gentleman was able to do that, given that, if an ordinary member of the public had engaged in such a practice, it would probably have been referred to the police?

Mrs. Beckett: No.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): May I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to a matter that should concern the House, but is somewhat reminiscent of a Monty Python sketch involving a skeleton and a telephone box? I have here a letter from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, dated 5 January, which opens with the sentence

"Thank you for your letter of 21 May to Gordon Brown."

Does the right hon. Lady suppose that my correspondence fell into a deed box and was sent off to Guernsey during the period in question? Will she undertake to mount an informal inquiry into what is happening to correspondence in Her Majesty's Treasury? This may well be the record example to date, but it is by no means the only example of delayed correspondence relating to our constituents and to Treasury matters.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that, as I do not remember the sketch to which the hon. Gentleman referred, the allusion was somewhat lost on me. I do, however, understand his concern if there is delay in the handling of correspondence, and I shall draw his remarks to the attention of the relevant Ministers.

As I am sure the hon. Gentleman realises, the Treasury receives an enormous amount of correspondence. While no one could possibly think it satisfactory that he, or his constituent, had to wait so long for a reply, sometimes things slip through the net.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Would it be possible for the Leader of the House to arrange for a Welsh Office Minister to wind up the debate that we are shortly to have on national health service rationing, because three issues have recently been raised in the Welsh media? Age rationing is going on in hospitals in Wales. The lengthening time that junior doctors now have to work in Welsh hospitals is appalling and, even using the fiddled figures of the Government, there are 3,000 more people on waiting lists than at the time of the last general election.

The important point is that people are now waiting longer than before when they finally get on to the waiting list. At the general election, they were told that things could only get better, but, for many patients and people wanting medical help in Wales, things have got worse.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is right in identifying that there will be a debate on health service matters in the near future, when it will be possible for those who catch your eye, Madam Speaker, to raise those issues.

Obviously, who opens and winds up particular debates is a matter for consideration. It is not for me to give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that he seeks. I am sure that his remarks have been heard.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): May I ask the right hon. Lady to clarify one point about the royal commission on the House of Lords? Can she guarantee that there will be an oral statement in the House when the royal commission is set up? We would expect such a statement and the opportunity to question whoever makes it.

Can the right hon. Lady clarify, or say when she expects to be able to clarify, the position regarding the February week? We voted against the package that she put before the House before Christmas, but we believe that the House has the right to know whether we are to have that week. If we are not to have it, can she please tell us whether we shall at least have part of it?

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

Finally, in view of what the right hon. Lady said to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), can she give an undertaking to him and to me that, as we agree with her on PR, we can be invited to join the Cabinet Committee to discuss it?

Mrs. Beckett: Picking up on the hon. Gentleman's last point first, I do not think that anyone is suggesting that that is a feature of discussions at present, but I hear what he says.

The hon. Gentleman asks me to clarify the issue about the February week. I cannot give him any further clarification than I have already given. In the debate close to Christmas, when the matter was raised, I made it plain that it might not be possible to make such an arrangement this year, but that the Government would keep the matter under review, depending on the progress of business.

I had not intended to make the following point—indeed, I refrained from making it before—but I have noticed that all the hon. Members who have so far approached me to ask for certainty—and I understand that certainty is important to hon. Members—about whether that week will be provided, are Members who voted against our having it.

The hon. Gentleman asks me about a statement on the royal commission. It would be as well if we undertook to keep those matters under review through the usual channels. Although I fully understand and appreciate the wish of the House to be properly informed, he may find that we are able to deal with the matter in a way that may not call for a specific statement when the commission is set up, so we could perhaps undertake to keep the matter under review through the usual channels. There is no intention to deprive the House of any opportunity to comment as fully as it would wish on those matters.

Mr. Wardle: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In her reply to me during business questions, the Leader of the House, I think inadvertently, suggested that East Sussex county council is under Conservative control. I can understand why she should think that that should be so, and I am sure that it will be the case before long, but, at present, it is not the case.

Mrs. Beckett: I apologise. I was misinformed. I did not wish to misinform the House.

Orders of the Day

Public Accounts

1.29 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the 1st to 67th Reports of the Committee of Public Accounts of Session 1997–98, and of the Treasury Minutes and Northern Ireland Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda on these Reports (Cm 3880, 3893, 3894, 3936, 3955, 3973, 4004, 4015, 4021, 4041, 4055, 4060, 4069, 4075) with particular reference to the following Reports:

Twenty-seventh, Measures to Combat Housing Benefit Fraud (HC 366);

Thirty-second, Cataract Surgery in Scotland (HC 546);

Thirty-fourth, Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Irregular Payments at the British Embassy in Amman, Jordan (HC 553);

Forty-fourth, Northern Ireland Social Security Agency: The Administration of the Disability Allowance (HC 527);

Forty-sixth, The Contract to Develop and Update the Replacement National Insurance Recording System (HC 472);

Sixty-first, Getting Value for Money in Privatisations (HC 992);

Sixty-seventh, HM Treasury: Resource Accounting and Resource-Based Supply (HC 731).

In the past year, the Public Accounts Committee has published 67 reports, more than in any equivalent period in our 137-year history. Those reports ranged from a review of the home energy efficiency scheme, designed to provide warmth to the most vulnerable in our society, to a study of the operation of the Department of Social Security, which spends some £96 billion of taxpayers' money each year.

The number and variety of reports that we have produced is a testament to the quality, dedication to duty, and breadth and experience of the staff of the National Audit Office who support us. However, it is also a testament to the commitment and perspicacity of the members of the Committee, who twice a week grapple with diverse topics that require stamina, forensic intelligence and tenacity in equal measure—qualities that my colleagues on the Committee undoubtedly possess. I take this opportunity to thank all of them for their dedicated hard work.

I also extend my special gratitude to the hon. Members for Corby (Mr. Hope) and for Shipley (Mr. Leslie), both of whom had to resign from the Committee after a year of sterling work, although I am glad to say that the reason for their resignations was the happy one that they both received well-deserved promotions. I also extend my thanks to the Clerk of the Committee, Mr. Ken Brown, and to his dedicated staff, who made a formidable job possible.

Finally, I want to extend my personal gratitude to the senior member of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), who made his sage advice freely available to me when I had to deal with a number of rather difficult problems.

We also welcomed two new members of the Committee, the hon. Members for Halton (Mr. Twigg) and for City of Durham (Mr. Steinberg), both of whom have shown already that they will be assets to the team. The newest formal member of the Committee is, of course, the new Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the

hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), whom I am pleased to congratulate on her promotion. As well as her undoubted ability, she brings to the Committee a reputation for commitment to open government and transparency—matters that the Committee holds dear.

The Committee is steeped in the history of public service reform, the result of Gladstone's determination to raise the standards of the British civil service to unprecedented heights and to set the standards for services in the rest of the world. We have a long and learned history, but what makes the Public Accounts Committee important and relevant today—despite tumultuous change and a near-revolution in public service delivery—is its ability to grasp the nettle of change and to continue to make an impact.

That impact can be financial. Each year, the work of the NAO and the Public Accounts Committee generates substantial savings—some £365 million in 1997 alone. Those savings come from diverse areas, from controlling the cost of prison food and the redesign of benefit order books to cut fraud, to the proper of use of lottery money. The sums involved range from relatively small savings of, perhaps, £1 million to savings of tens of millions of pounds a year. To paraphrase the American billionaire Nelson Bunker Hunt, "A million here and a million there and pretty soon you're talking real money." Real money indeed: over three years, savings of £1 billion have been achieved, equivalent to £8 saved for every pound spent to run the NAO.

Saving taxpayers' cash is important, but we also have a qualitative impact. Last year alone, about 2,500 significant changes to systems in audited bodies were prompted by the Committee's work. The Committee has maintained its record over the past few years by ensuring that more than 90 per cent. of our recommendations have been accepted by the Government.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I congratulate the Public Accounts Committee on a remarkable year's work. One of the features of the Committee is that, by and large, it examines expenditure incurred several years previously. In the case of the channel tunnel rail link, I am delighted that the Committee will look at expenditure that has yet to be finally incurred. Is that a possible precedent for the Committee's future activities? Will it be able to study likely costs before they are incurred?

Mr. Davis: I am not 100 per cent. sure of the reference that my hon. Friend makes, but the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have, historically, examined contractual arrangements that extend into the future. I shall refer to one such arrangement later: indeed, the problems of hindsight and of creating lessons for the future will form a major theme of my speech. I will press on as I have much to say and I do not want to take up too much time.

It is no accident that since Gladstone's reforms—indeed, only since those reforms—the British civil service has become a worldwide watchword for honesty and commitment to public service. That is a reputation that we treasure and it is one that our Committee seeks to defend by its actions. The Committee's effectiveness depends and rests on accountability. We have the most impact when we can hold those truly responsible to account for failures and weaknesses in policy implementation. The British tradition of accounting officers, who are responsible to Parliament for the work of their Departments, is a cornerstone of our constitution and it is one that must not crumble.

Recently, I have become concerned that some accounting officers are not taking their responsibilities to Parliament as seriously as they should. Perhaps a few examples will illustrate that. The first may sound trivial, but it is not. At the hearing on the millennium threat, I asked the accounting officer of the Office of Public Service—the man responsible for dealing with the millennium bug—whether he would be available to report back to the Committee in February 2000, which seemed a reasonable request at the time. It was not his fault, but he promptly responded that he would retire a few months before the date at which the bug took effect, just before the turn of the year 2000. Although it was not his fault, it is indicative of an attitude to accountability that the single civil servant who has a time-limited task will not be in place for it.

More sombrely, following the fraudulent loss of £333,000 from the British embassy in Amman, the accounting officer from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office told the Committee in February 1997 that he had made improvements to financial controls his top priority. He gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) the assurance that he was, "as sure as anybody" that no additional fraud had taken place. One year on, his successor was in front of the Committee, this time to explain a further £100,000 fraud at the same embassy. To be fair, that accounting officer appears to be taking the Committee's comments extremely seriously, as he should.

Accounting officers must also pay Parliament the courtesy of keeping the Committee informed of key developments on issues in which we have taken an interest. This Session, one of our more important reports was the 46th report on the private finance initiative contract for the new national insurance recording system. We were concerned about the delays in the delivery of the system. However, in a response to our report, which was issued in September, the Department did not inform us about the continuing and worsening problems with the system. Instead, it chose to reveal the true picture in a written answer in November, which explained that it was experiencing further problems affecting benefit claims for as many as 300,000 people, many of whom were pensioners. There was a major crisis in a system that had so recently been the subject of a critical report by the Committee. Clearly, that should have been brought to our attention. The Department's response was unsatisfactory and, no doubt, we will revisit that issue this Session.

Finally on accountability, our most recent report on the Ministry of Defence major projects statement demonstrates the tendency in some parts of Government to fail to act promptly on our recommendations. We sometimes feel that we are making the same points to a small number of Whitehall Departments year after year. In this debate last year, my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page), who is here today, highlighted that point when dealing with the long-running problems of the British Library. This year, in the report on the Ministry of Defence's major projects, we highlight the repeated findings of the PAC of weaknesses in the procurement of defence equipment. If we wanted to press

[Mr. Davis]

the point, we could cite one case that predates the last Liberal Government—those with a strong sense of history will know that that was a long time ago indeed.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Davis: If the intervention is brief.

Mr. Cash: It is. Has my right hon. Friend noticed the letter in *The Times* today from Geoffrey Martin, head of the European Commission in the United Kingdom, which suggests that much of the fraud problem in the European Union is the responsibility of national Parliaments? Does he agree that there is a strong case—as I suggested during debates on the European Communities (Finance) Bill in 1995—for closer working relations between our Public Accounts Committee—which expresses a view based on real accountability, unlike other national Parliaments—and the Court of Auditors?

Mr. Davis: I will come to European fraud later. We take an interest in that through the publications of the European Court of Auditors and our reports on them. It will be easier if I deal with my hon. Friend's comments at length when I reach that point.

I have made my concerns about accountability in Whitehall known to the Cabinet Secretary, and it is clear that he understands them. The Committee successfully combines its clear role on accountability, casting a retrospective eye over events, with a forward-looking approach. We might be accused of exercising judgment solely with the benefit of hindsight, but our purpose is not simply to criticise poor performance, but to ensure that lessons are learned. By highlighting examples of good and bad practice, we have provided Departments with practical assistance. We have placed emphasis on assisting the development of new and innovative public management techniques such as performance measurement, resource accounting and the private finance initiative.

Our forward-looking approach is illustrated most strikingly by our 61st report, the thematic report on privatisation, which drew on some 35 reports spanning nearly 20 years and containing a wealth of experience gained from studying privatisation throughout the previous Administration. The lessons that we identified will be relevant to future privatisations. I was pleased to note the Government's positive response to it. I hope that the Treasury will ensure that the lessons that we set out are spread across Government. We expect soon to publish a similar report on the lessons arising from the early PFI projects and are considering the scope for compiling good practice guidance from our work on computer failures and on the higher and further education sectors.

The Committee aims to be constructive and to react positively to developments in government. We will give criticism where it is due, but we will do so to prompt change and ensure that mistakes do not recur. To do that well, the Committee requires comprehensive rights of access for the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office. It requires new access rights to match developments in government.

That is the first of four themes that have run through the Committee's work in the past year. There has been considerable progress in that time. The Government wisely conceded the Public Accounts Committee's request for National Audit Office access to the grants in aid for royal transport and the royal palaces. The greater transparency will renew public confidence in the monarchy.

Access to the lottery operator was essential. I congratulate the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on his willingness to drive through the necessary change in lottery legislation. I am also pleased that the Comptroller and Auditor General has been appointed auditor of all the 17 executive bodies set up by this Government. However, more could be done.

I repeat my call for the CAG to be appointed auditor of all non-departmental bodies. The current arrangements are illogical and confused. Some bodies spend huge sums of public money but escape the rigour of the CAG's audit scrutiny. For example, the Legal Aid Board spends some £1.2 billion of public money each year. The decision to replace it with a legal services commission presented an opportunity to address the point but the current proposals do not. I am writing to the Minister to ask that this be reconsidered and the accountability arrangements for legal aid brought in line with those for other areas of public expenditure.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not only illogical and confusing that the National Audit Office does not have access to non-departmental Government bodies but dangerous, because fraud could be taking place? There is a gap between the Audit Commission and the National Audit Office in which there is no rigorous auditing. The NAO should be given access to such bodies.

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is right. It is a question not only of fraud, but of waste. All parties have been concerned about the sheer cost of legal aid over the years. Information that would have returned to Parliament from value-for-money studies arising out of the Comptroller and Auditor General's access would have provided a valuable common foundation for the sorts of reforms for which all parties are on side.

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): As I do not want to sneeze my way through a speech, I will not be able to make a speech today so may I emphasise to the Minister that the point that has just been raised by the Chairman is not only a personal point or a point made by only one side of the Committee, but a House of Commons point? The Committee feels that very strongly and we hope that the Minister will respond to the point.

Mr. Davis: I thank—I almost said my right hon. Friend, but I do not want to do him that much damage—the right hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. I am sorry that he is not able to speak today. His contribution to the Committee has been one of the most valuable and one on which I have rested throughout the year.

The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) is illustrated even better by the example of the Housing Corporation and the

housing associations. The Housing Corporation spends some £1.1 billion per annum, but the Comptroller and Auditor General and, therefore, Parliament has no right of access to the records of housing associations. There are 2,600 such bodies in the United Kingdom, and they receive £1.2 billion of public money. Their assets—the houses that they rent out—were largely provided by public finance. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General has to negotiate every time that he wants access to a housing association.

Our predecessor Committee in 1994 noted significant weaknesses in the Housing Corporation's control of housing associations. I regret to say—this relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold—that weaknesses of long standing in one association's procedures have come to light involving alleged corruption and fraud. I cannot say any more because the case may come to court. It is clearly time for Parliament to have a right to information from housing associations. The way to ensure that it does is for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have a right of access.

I also have concerns about the adequacy of the scrutiny arrangements in matters that arise from the constitutional changes as a result of devolution. In total, some £20 billion has been paid in grants to Scotland and Northern Ireland from taxes raised by this Parliament for which this Parliament is accountable to taxpayers. We should recognise that devolution will reduce Parliament's ability to call to account those responsible for spending taxpayers' money in Scotland and Northern Ireland. I am pleased that the Government accepted my call for independent audit arrangements in the Northern Irish and Scottish devolution Bills, but a very real accountability gap has been built into the new arrangements.

Three reports from the year illustrate my point. Our work on cataract surgery in Scotland, the privatisation of Belfast international airport and the administration of disability living allowance in Northern Ireland would not have been possible under the new arrangements. Those who disagree will argue rightly that the local PACs—which, incidentally were set up at our request by the Government—will deal with such issues, but in each case a large part of United Kingdom taxpayers' money and subvention will go to Northern Ireland and Scotland.

I reiterate the point made last year by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle and since echoed by my predecessor as Chairman of the PAC, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), that it is unacceptable that the Comptroller and Auditor General's rights of access are less extensive than the powers of the European Court of Auditors in respect of the final recipients of EU grants. Without such access, the Comptroller and Auditor General's ability to report to Parliament for EU spending in the United Kingdom is seriously impaired. On today of all days, we should take that issue seriously. I shall deal with the issue of the European Union later.

The next theme running through our work this year has been the need to combat fraud. Central Government spend more than £300 a week on behalf of every family in the country. It is our duty to those families that we ensure that their money is spent properly in their interests, and that we minimise the risk that taxpayers' hard-earned money is stolen, defrauded or misappropriated within government. Our interest ranges from the systematic defrauding of large social security budgets to the misappropriation of relatively small sums by individuals at overseas embassies that I mentioned earlier. The magnitude might differ, but the principle remains the same.

In our 27th report, the Committee considered the measures introduced by the Department of Social Security to combat housing benefit fraud. We found it totally unacceptable that housing benefit fraud exceeded £900 million a year—about 8 per cent. of the total spending on that benefit. Our report emphasised the need for the benefit system to strike a balance between the addressing of needs fairly, and simple and secure administration. We were concerned about the impact of the interaction between benefits in creating opportunities for fraud. The failure of the Department of Social Security and the benefits agencies to control properly claims for other benefits, such as income support and jobseeker's allowance, creates a gateway to fraud in housing benefit. The Committee stressed the need to design fraud out of the benefit system—that is very important for the Treasury in planning for future years.

I am pleased that the Government appear to be taking fraud seriously and welcome their commitment to examine the funding arrangements that best suit a robust counter-fraud strategy. It is too early for us to judge the effectiveness of that strategy; it clearly did not reduce the level of fraud, as was shown by the accounts published during the past few weeks. However, as the strategy bites, we hope to reconsider that matter.

In our report on the irregular payments at the British embassy in Amman that I mentioned earlier—and in the interests of time, I will shorten my remarks now—the Committee focused mainly on the importance of ensuring that financial control systems work and, most important, that the people who abuse them are punished appropriately. The report emphasised the need to regard sound financial management as an essential feature of any successful organisation, and that it should not be seen as a second order activity—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle in Committee. We were not satisfied with the disciplinary measures taken against those who should have prevented the fraud—a point made by another hon. Member—and negligence in fiduciary duties should be regarded as a very serious offence.

Finally, I turn to irregularity on a grand scale in the European Union—a matter on which I have already taken two interventions. Our 35th report pointed out the serious institutional difficulties that arise when proper controls are not in place. The Committee expressed serious concern that, for the third successive year at that point, the Court of Auditors could not provide a positive statement of assurance on the legality and regularity of European Community payments because of the large number of errors that had been identified. Those errors cost about £3.5 billion.

All that took place before the current debacle, which is coming, or will have come, to a head today in the vote in the European Parliament. I will not comment on the vote itself, but hon. Members might find it valuable if I give a brief history of the issue, which might help them to put the current arguments in context.

As long ago as 1990, there were allegations of fraud in the European Community's tourism unit. In 1995, there were allegations of irregularities in the Commission's

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management of assistance to Mediterranean countries. In March 1998, the European Parliament postponed its decision to discharge the Commission from responsibility for the 1996 budget, citing the urgent need to improve accountability in the fight against fraud. In July 1998, the European Court of Auditors published a highly critical report on the effectiveness of the Commission's task force for co-ordination of fraud prevention—the so-called UCLAF. At that time, I called for major improvements in the approach taken to tackling fraud within the Commission, as the extant arrangements clearly were not working.

In autumn 1998, there were allegations of irregularities and fraud in the European Community's humanitarian aid office and the European Parliament called for an independent European anti-fraud office to be established, similar to that which I had suggested in July 1998. Around that time, Jacques Santer accepted the need for such an office—but it also seemed to be accepted that it would take 18 months to two years to put in place. In December 1998, Parliament again postponed its discharge decision about the 1996 Budget, citing that the Commission had failed to satisfy it about improvements in combating fraud and corruption. We now know about the revelations of the European Union official that have caused the current crisis.

Irrespective of the outcome of the parliamentary vote, if the European Union does not come to grips with the fraud within its ranks, the citizens of the Union will lose faith and trust in the EU's ability to spend taxpayers' money. That would be a very damaging outcome. I believe that the simplest way for the European Union to get a grip on the fraud problem that it clearly faces is by instituting the anti-fraud office—which I called for last July—not in two years, but immediately. I know that it cannot be set up tomorrow, but it should be established within a few months—as near to immediately as possible.

The third theme running through our work this year was privatisation. There is not necessarily a consensus of view on the Committee about the policy of privatisation. I believe that it has proved extremely successful and that former public services have thrived under the privatisation policy. I note also that some £12 billion in assets are earmarked for release to the private sector under this Government. However, the Committee is interested not in privatisation policy, but in the effectiveness of its delivery, and that has been our focus this year.

Our 61st report brought together the cumulative lessons learnt from 35 studies of asset sales undertaken by the Committee and its predecessors. Over the past 20 years, more than 150 state-owned businesses have been privatised, raising some £90 billion for the taxpayer at current prices. The general lessons upon which we reported included the need for proper valuations to be conducted before the sale—that would seem to be fairly straightforward—the need for clawback arrangements to be included when a high degree of uncertainty surrounds the sale, and the advisability of selling shares in stages in order to deal with the ferocious difficulty of establishing fair market valuations before the capacity to thrive in the private sector has been demonstrated.

I could cite several such cases from this year, which I am sure that other hon. Members will also wish to highlight. Therefore, in the interests of brevity, I shall leave them to one side. However, as the case is important to Northern Ireland, I shall pick up consideration of the sale of Belfast international airport, which provided a stark example of some of the problems. In our report, we drew attention to the need to follow proper privatisation procedures and to achieve transparency in the conduct of a sale. That is vital if public and market confidence are to be maintained when public assets are being sold. We were concerned that the Department had not investigated more thoroughly why the successful bid from the management buy-out team had dropped by more than £6 million to within £900,000 of the next highest bid. That struck us as being a singularly suspicious outcome.

Our work has raised a major privatisation strategy issue regarding the need for the taxpayer to receive a fair price based not just on the performance of the industry in the public sector, but on the prospective performance of the industry in the private sector. The true value of a business cannot crystallise until it operates in the private sector. That consideration is not confined to the public sector. It has been noted on several occasions that, in the case of management buy-outs, spin-offs from major companies can enjoy phenomenal increases in profitability when management is allowed—and, indeed, motivated—to exercise its initiative in running the company.

Many major companies have underestimated the value that can accrue from privatised parts of their concerns. Therefore, I suppose that it is no surprise that Governments make the same mistake. Nevertheless, it highlights the need for an improved privatisation strategy. Clawback provisions in the case of a private sale and the need to sell shares in stages in order to achieve the best price once the true value of a company is known are simple but effective measures that provide an improved strategy.

In addition to seeking to secure economic and efficient public services, we spent a substantial proportion of our time investigating issues of effectiveness, which has been the fourth theme of the year. Effectiveness is the quality of service that taxpayers receive. Our work in that area has covered the timely and effective delivery of services, the regulation of service providers and management and control processes. Again, our interest is broad, ranging from large public services such as social security to small-scale spending on vital public services such as cataract surgery in Scotland. Where public services fail, we have sought improved delivery.

In considering the starkest example, the Child Support Agency, we picked up on the work of our predecessors, who had significant concerns about the operation of the system, in particular the level of inaccuracy in assessment. We reviewed progress and concluded that unless firm action was taken, the Child Support Agency would continue to bring unnecessary hardship and suffering to thousands. We urge the Department of Social Security and the agency to look long and hard at the complexity that is built into the system and at ways of clearing away the errors and irrecoverable debt of the past. It is unacceptable that the agency's current accuracy target of 85 per cent. means that one in six cases—almost 80,000 cases in 1997-98—are wrong if the agency hits its target.

Our report on cataract surgery in Scotland was different. We examined the performance of the national health service in Scotland in increasing the proportion of cataract operations carried out as day cases and ensuring equality of access to cataract surgery across Scotland.

The National Audit Office report considered day care surgery in the round and found that its use increased the number of operations possible and reduced costs.

Although cataract surgery in Scotland requires a relatively small budget of £14 million, it is one of the most effective operations carried out in the national health service. It gives back sight to many elderly people and improves their quality of life. We were therefore dismayed by the slow progress in raising levels of day surgery for cataracts and by the wide variation in the level of day surgery across the trusts. It is shocking that many patients are effectively blind by the time they are referred for cataract surgery. The report is a good example of work that is based on one part of the United Kingdom but which has resonance throughout. I very much hope that the audit arrangements after devolution will explicitly allow for the sharing of good practice because that is a vital consideration.

My final theme, as my colleagues will be glad to hear, arises from changes that are afoot in the way in which Government policy is delivered to the public.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): One minute, Chairman.

Mr. Davis: The Minister sees the discipline that is exercised in our Committee being applied to the Chairman, for a change.

The Prime Minister announced only recently the development of public service agreements to focus on outcomes, examining the implementation of policy in the round. He rightly pointed out that the public care little about who delivers a service—whether it is delivered by local or national Government—and they do not care at all about interdepartmental wrangles that might occur. They care about the effective delivery of service. The Prime Minister calls that joined-up government. I prefer to call it performance-driven government, because that is what matters.

Performance measurement has the potential to be the great governmental reform of this era. It is not a party political issue. Several Governments around the world, most famously in New Zealand, have undertaken initiatives on performance measurement. It has been a major component of speeches made by the leader of the Liberal Democrats. It was started in this country some years ago by the previous Administration in the "Competing for Quality" White Paper and other initiatives. It will continue under this Government with the introduction of resource accounting, public service agreements and specific initiatives in health and education.

There is wide acceptance of the value of performance measurement, but there are dangers, too. Public performance measurement will be effective only if the information that it delivers is of iron-clad integrity and is seen as such by the public and the public sector managers whose successes and failures are judged by it. The temptation to bias performance measurement for party political interest will be enormous, but must be resisted if the reform is to achieve its potential. The introduction of resource accounting illustrates the point.

Resource accounting is the most important development in public accounting for almost a century and a half. It will introduce commercial-style accrual accounting for central Government Departments and, most important, it will include analysis of expenditures by aims and objectives, relating them to outputs where possible. It is due to take effect this year and will impact directly on the measurement of performance. Our 67th report on resource accounting and resource-based supply explored in some detail the implications of this.

In our view, if we are to have good, clear accounts for the public sector, we also need a similar system of good, clear performance information to go with it, but Departments must identify the right measures and targets for their performance—measures that will properly serve the needs of the Departments, the Treasury, Parliament and, of course, fundamentally, the public.

The political will seems to be there. There is scope for greater focus on performance in Government policy with more tangible accountabilities. Information technology has developed to provide a new, powerful tool for collecting and evaluating information which can be used to make these accountabilities real and catalyse significant improvements in performance. However, if we are to believe in this, we must ensure that the information we receive is seen and accepted by all as proper performance information, not political propaganda in any sense. This requires independent validation of performance measures. The proper way forward would be for the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff at the National Audit Office to do this and to report to Parliament regularly.

The National Audit Office is developing an appropriate validation methodology for setting, compiling and presenting the output and performance analysis. The Public Accounts Committee should be looking forward to regular reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General on the validation of performance measures, but we are disappointed that the Treasury has not yet committed to independent validation. At present, validation will be left with the appropriate Minister, and I am afraid that the public will view that with the same scepticism that they might view a school report written in the child's own handwriting.

Parliament should have an input into the debate on performance measures that will be adopted and should have independent confirmation that the targets set are being achieved. The importance of this cannot be overstated. It will affect the service that constituents get for the money they pay. It will be the way of the future for holding the Government to account, and Parliament's rights and responsibilities should be clear from the outset. Done badly, it will corrode the citizen's faith in government; done well, it will materially improve government, and continue to do so far into the future.

Gladstone, the founder of our Committee, once said that it was the duty of government to make it difficult for people to do wrong, and easy for people to do right. Properly executed, properly audited performance measures will make it difficult for the Government to do wrong and easy for them to do right.

I urge the Minister to consider carefully and to accept that all Government performance measures should be subject to independent audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General of this Parliament. It is a crucial part of Parliament's duty to scrutinise the actions of the Executive and to hold the Executive to account. Accordingly, in measuring the delivery of public services

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to all our constituents, it should be Parliament, through its instrument—the National Audit Office—which should be the final arbiter of what is a true and fair measure.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified Her Royal Assent to the following Act:

European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999.

2.9 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): On that happy note—from our point of view, and from that of those who share common interest with us in these matters—I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, at not too great length, I hope, and to follow the distinguished Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee whom I congratulate on his speech. More important, I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman, his colleagues, the civil service and all the other staff on the excellent and—as is evident to anyone who has been to the Vote Office to collect the papers—the voluminous outpourings of the Public Accounts Committee.

The motion stands also in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), who is a long-serving and senior member of the PAC. On his behalf, I convey his apologies for not being present. Owing to arrangements made before the recess and before the change in the timing of our sittings, it is impossible for him to be present for the debate.

I shall address only the 42nd report, which deals with the Skye bridge in my constituency, and the Treasury memorandum in reply. I thank the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, who in the course of his duties has been courteous and concerned to deal directly with my constituents. They have, over many years, raised persistent financial, political and legal concerns about the entire contract.

The protesters welcomed—as I do—the PAC report and its scathing appraisal of the Government of the day and the sad and sorry background to the contract and to the difficulties that have resulted. Although the present Government inherited this mess—it was not of their making—at the end of my remarks I shall put one or two thoughts to the Minister, which I hope she will take on board. If she cannot reply today, perhaps she will explain after the debate what the Government see as the way forward.

The history of the contract goes back a long way. It covers the stewardships of Malcolm Rifkind, Ian Lang and Michael Forsyth as successive Secretaries of State, as well as that of the present incumbent of that office. The Public Accounts Committee rightly inquired into the background. The most telling conclusion of its generally damning report was that the terms on which the bridge was provided, including the real rate of return to equity investors in the project of 18.4 per cent. a year, were not "determined competitively." In a casino, 18.4 per cent. is a pretty good rate of return if it has not been determined competitively.

The Committee felt that it was not possible to be satisfied that the costs of the bridge were reasonable. It questioned whether value for money has been secured for the taxpayers as well as the toll payers who have to foot the bill. Anyone who has visited that part of the United Kingdom will know that it is a short crossing from the mainland at Kyle of Lochalsh to the south end of the Isle of Skye. The single toll fare for an average car with only the driver in it is in excess of £5. An astronomical burden is being placed on a fragile community whose members have low incomes compared with the national average. The bridge is an important gateway to the western isles of Scotland, which have an even more fragile economy. The charges applied to commercial vehicles are quite astronomical. That is the background to this vexed issue.

The Treasury minute was produced by the Scottish Office Development Department—which in this context sounds like a contradiction in terms. I do not believe in shooting the messenger, but I am concerned that the civil servants who advised Ian Lang, Malcolm Rifkind and Michael Forsyth are, in large measure, the same civil servants who are now advising the present Secretary of State. I am not surprised that many of them are not exactly volunteering to come forward with their hands up and admit that they made a complete and utter dog's breakfast of negotiating the contract—at such an advantageous rate to the developer and such a disadvantageous rate to my constituents and the users of the bridge.

The minute that the Scottish Office Development Department produced in response to the PAC report can at best be described as casual in the extreme. It says:

"The Department notes the Committee's comments. Given the low level of traffic, high dependency on tourist traffic and the novelty of the project"—

note that word "novelty"—

"the Department could not have reasonably expected to secure guarantees. Provision had to be made in the contract to cover the possibility of a longer toll period, and tolls which might have exceeded the original target, although the Department was confident at the time of the negotiations that these eventualities would not arise."

That is very reassuring. What the minute is saying in civil service speak is that the Department was making it up as it went along. This project was the forerunner of the private finance initiative programme for the United Kingdom as a whole. It is no wonder that we have ended up with the political and economic fiasco that has been the subject of so much of my in-tray for the past five years.

Not only is the question whether the taxpayer has been well served worthy of debate, but we have reason to question the National Audit Office figures on which the PAC report was based. Those figures were based on the developer's financial project model for the contract, yet the financial model differs substantially from the figures in the accounts of Skye Bridge Ltd.

The financial model shows the developer's input for 1991 as £12.3 million, whereas the audited accounts show the developer's contribution for 1991 as £0.6 million. In 1991-96, the financial model, which the NAO accepted, shows the developer's costs as £27.3 million, whereas the audited accounts show the costs for the same period as only £19.3 million. If the model overplays the developer's contribution, equally, it underplays the cost to the taxpayer. The model shows the taxpayers' contribution for 1991-96 as £10.6 million, whereas the actual contribution revealed in the accounts is £11.6 million.

It is not our function to question the accuracy of the NAO's figures. My argument is not with the NAO, but the fact that it has had to accept figures provided by the developer and has not apparently had access to or checked the audited accounts is cause for serious concern. The developer's version of the figures seems to have been seriously inaccurate. It is hardly surprising that all the apparent errors worked in the developer's favour.

The NAO, not surprisingly, is as confused as everyone else by the fog surrounding the funding of the Skye bridge contract. For example, figure 10 on page 45 of the audit report gives the construction costs as £20 million, whereas figure 13 on page 49 of the self-same report gives them as £27.3 million. This issue is riddled with difficulties, complexities, contradictions and confusions, so it is no wonder that the contract has led to the problems that are before the Scottish courts.

For years, I have pursued this issue with four Secretaries of State in the House, in the Scottish Grand Committee and in Adjournment debates. There is a serious case for the Treasury taking the matter by the scruff of the neck before Scottish devolution and before it becomes the remit of the Scottish Parliament, and conducting a properly independent examination of the entire financial background to the Skye bridge contract. The cost to the public purse is a damn disgrace, and this major scandal must be investigated.

I am not satisfied that I am consistently receiving information or the relevant answers to my questions from the institution of the Scottish Office—I am not referring to the Secretary of State personally. Moreover, the Treasury should have a searching look into the effect on the public purse before responsibility for the matter is passed to Edinburgh following devolution.

Skye Bridge Ltd—which is essentially the Bank of America—and its agents are allowed to recover £23.64 million in tolls over the lifetime of the contract. That is not as simple as it would seem—nothing is simple in this world. The toll revenue is counted in constant 1991 prices, discounted at 6 per cent. a year to a 1991 base year. That acts as a sort of negative form of compound interest. In year one—1991—£1,000 in tolls would count as £1,000 off the debt. If it is discounted by 6 per cent. each year, by year 10, the compounding effect would mean that £1,000 in tolls to count as only £573 off the accumulated debt. Therefore, a great deal more than £23.64 million in real terms would need to be taken to clear the debt, which is hanging like an albatross around the community's neck.

It gets worse. The cost of collecting the tolls is running at £750,000 per year. In other words, about £1.40 of the cost of each crossing is used to service the cost of collecting the toll. On present prices, over a 25-year period, that comes to the unbelievable figure of £18.75 million. As I have said, that is just to collect the tolls, not the value of them.

Why does it cost so much? Surely, that figure knocks a huge hole in any repayment of the notional figure of £23.64 million. Can one assume, therefore, that £23.64 million is a net figure after operating costs have been taken into account?

Taking into account both those points, the Minister should ask the Treasury to estimate what will be collected in tolls before the net figure of £23.64 million, counted in constant 1991 terms and discounted at 6 per cent. a year, is cleared. Will it be £60 million or £70 million? We have never been given an accurate figure.

The toll takings should be made public. A few months ago the national Mod, the highlands and islands equivalent of the Eisteddfod in Wales, took place on the Isle of Skye. It is a huge cultural celebration and a major event in the Scottish calendar. As one would expect, there was a huge influx of people for that week. Out of interest, I wrote to the toll company to find out how much more was taken in tolls given the vast influx of people for that event at the end of the summer season. I received a courteous reply saying that the company does not reveal its figures. As the local Member of Parliament I am not allowed to know how much the company made out of that major national event. That is a disgrace. A few days ago, we were debating freedom of information. I look forward to that legislation because private companies such as the toll company, which have signed a deal with the Government of the day at a cost to the public purse, should not be immune from having to declare their profits and takings in the same way as any other company in a public position.

My constituents and the House have a right to know how much has been collected from the public purse and how much has been paid to the private developer. Currently, we only have estimates of how much is being taken in. We have every right to know.

The House will be pleased to know that I have now reached my final point. It concerns matters that are currently before the Court of Session in Scotland. I know that the Clerk to the Public Accounts Committee is concerned that we should not breach the sub judice rule. I can assure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Chairman of the PAC that I have no intention of doing that.

There is a case before the Court of Session now. It was heard on December 10 and 11. It involves one of my constituents questioning the legality of the toll regime. We are awaiting the final written judgment from the court, which is expected sooner rather than later. It is an interdict that has been brought in a Scottish court and, under Scots law, the sub judice provisions do not apply as it is not a criminal case and it has already been aired publicly in court. The only basis for applying the sub judice rule would be the basis of prejudice against the respondent, my constituent. I can place on record the fact that he has waived any right to such privilege and he is happy for me to discuss one or two aspects of the case.

There has been a civil disobedience campaign associated with the toll regime. My constituents have been subject to criminal prosecution on the basis of a toll order that was never published and an assignation statement that only ever appeared with a draft order and was completely inaccurate by the time the actual order was made. That cannot be right. The Secretary of State gave his written approval. The then Secretary of State wrote to me in December 1997:

> "The assignation of rights to charge and collect tolls is contained in the Concession Agreement between the Secretary of State and Skye Bridge Tolls Limited, the concessionaire. The Secretary of State was aware of and agreed to the appointment of Miller . . . Joint Venture to collect tolls as part of the management and operation of the bridge."

The tolls are collected by Miller Civil Engineering. That company—I have tabled written questions about this—is apparently registered as dormant at Companies house. It collects the tolls on behalf of MDJV, of which there is apparently no record at Companies house, on behalf of Skye Bridge Tolls Ltd, which is wholly owned

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by the Bank of America. Clause 23 of the concession agreement states that there will be no change in the financial arrangements without the written consent of the Secretary of State. No written consent has ever been produced in public at any of the legal hearings that have been taking place in Edinburgh. One can only assume that it does not exist.

I shall now come to the nub of this sorry saga—which represents a ludicrous affront to public finance—to which the Public Accounts Committee draws attention in its report. Huge sums of public money went into the Skye bridge project. My constituents and others are now being forced to pay massive tolls against their wishes. In such circumstances, surely the public and Parliament have a right to know the truth about such vital matters as ownership. The previous Government placed out-of-date documents in the official records of Parliament without any amendment to show the change in ownership details. As a result, I believe that that Administration was guilty of downright deception.

The Scottish Office is continuing to maintain that everything is wholly above board, proper and correct, despite the change in ownership which was never properly notified, the fact that the document was never made available and the fact that the tolls are being collected by a company different from that specified by the Secretary of State at the time. That strikes me as entirely implausible.

As I have said, further complications are now coming to light over the legal trading status of Miller Civil Engineering and MDJV. As I have said, Miller Civil Engineering is registered as a dormant company and there is a further suggestion—I have raised this in another written question—that MDJV is not even registered for value added tax. It has been confirmed to me by the Department of Trade and Industry that Miller Civil Engineering Ltd did not trade on its own account—those are the words of the DTI—during the last financial year, but it seems able to operate the collection of tolls on the Skye bridge.

There are too many unanswered questions in this quagmire. I am grateful to the Chairman and the Committee for exposing the affair and for bringing the luminosity of truth to bear on some of the shortcomings behind it. However, I remain convinced—I commend this suggestion to the Minister—that, prior to this issue falling within the jurisdiction of the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, we need the Treasury to instigate a complete and thorough overhaul and independent investigation of this entire sorry and shabby tale.

2.29 pm

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): I am grateful for an opportunity to speak in this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who has been the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee for nearly two years, although it probably feels more like 10. When I spoke in this debate last year, I welcomed him to his job and wished him a long and distinguished tenure. I should like to reiterate that. The right hon. Gentleman's predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), had an extremely long tenure and he remains one of those Members who is most respected on issues of public accounts, public spending and holding the Executive to account. If the current incumbent continues in his current vigorous form, I hope that in due course, perhaps after 14 years, he will also be as well respected as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne.

I do not wish to insult the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden gratuitously. I also recognise and welcome the vigour that he has shown in all debates in the House on public accounts. He has also been very active in the devolution debate. In his speech today, he made some valid and thoughtful points on the future of the Public Accounts Committee and on the way in which the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General will be able to operate in an environment in which public sector and Government institutional and auditing arrangements change fast. Who would dare to say that the Public Accounts Committee is backward-looking or retrospective in all its activities? The right hon. Member has clearly shown that it is not.

I add my voice to that of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden in congratulating the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff at the National Audit Office on their year-round work. Without their efforts and dedication, the Committee could not be anywhere near as effective as it has generally been recognised to be. Undoubtedly, our ability to scrutinise the Executive and to examine public spending would be almost completely destroyed were we not able to count on their efforts.

Over the next few years, the CAG and his staff face a massive increase in their work load. However, there are some concerns about diminished access because of changes in constitutional arrangements, the advent of resource accounting and the necessity of meeting other auditing bodies and new public accounts committees to try to keep a grip on public sector auditing. All those changes will massively increase their work load. I wish them well in coping with it. I hope that they will receive the resources that are necessary to continue contributing towards achieving the public sector savings that can be made using their auditing expertise.

I finish my preliminary thanks by saying that the Committee would be much less effective than it is were it not for its Clerk and his staff. I thank them and congratulate them on the work that they did for us in the previous Session.

I support the Chairman's comments on increasing access to information on public money. I know of no reason why Parliament, the National Audit Office and its auditor, the Comptroller and Auditor General, should not be able to follow public money raised by Parliament regardless of where it is spent. Achieving such tracking would be Committee members' nirvana and is our desired end result. I realise that practical considerations and changing institutional arrangements mean that achieving that goal is not possible, but it is our aspiration. I should welcome any suggestions on increasing access. I believe that the Government have been particularly open to such suggestions.

There is nothing like transparency—or a Public Accounts Committee—to make people wonder whether their spending arrangements and spending supervision are in order. I should therefore welcome any further action taken by the Government to increase access. The

Chairman mentioned the Legal Aid Board and the Housing Corporation. There is no reason why such organisations should not be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

I am happy to be participating in my second annual public accounts debate. Earlier today, while considering what to say in the debate, I wondered why our Committee has an annual debate, as not all Select Committees have that privilege. I suppose that our annual debate demonstrates the Committee's seniority and prestige in the House. It demonstrates also the historical importance of Parliament's role of scrutinising public spending and supply. Our annual debate also gives hon. Members, such as the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), an opportunity to make very detailed, prescient comments on matters such as the Skye bridge. It allows us to examine a specific matter closely, which the House is usually unable to do. That is the value of our annual debate, which I hope will continue.

Our annual debate also reflects the prestige of the Committee and of its work. One role of all Back Benchers, regardless of which party they belong to at a particular time, includes asking questions about how well we hold the Executive to account. When I say "the Executive", I do not mean only Ministers. I realise that many of our constituents think of the Executive as the Government and think of Cabinet Ministers, but one should not—especially when one is a member of the PAC—think of the Government in that way. The Committee deals not with Ministers but with accounting officers; we deal with Whitehall, not Downing street. When I think of the Executive, I tend to picture the "permanent" Executive rather than the "transient" Executive, which is the Government—although our current Government will be less transient than most.

We should consider the effect that the PAC can have on Whitehall. Committee members realise that the civil service and Whitehall accounting officers often feel nervous about appearing before the PAC, as we have often been told that they have such feelings. People are often concerned about having to appear at an evidence-taking session. We often receive feedback saying that we have perhaps been tough on Mr. X or Miss Y, who thought that we were a bit unfair. However, Committee members sometimes have to ask themselves a few uncomfortable questions. How well does the Committee perform? How well do we manage to promote the role of all hon. Members in scrutinising public spending? Are we doing well enough? Are there ways in which we can improve our performance?

The CAG and the PAC are very good at dealing with specific issues, such as fraud and propriety in spending—which are the Committee's bread-and-butter tasks. The Chairman mentioned the report on the Amman embassy scandal. It was scandalous that an official wrongly gave the PAC the assurances that we were given. However, the case demonstrated the fact that Whitehall generally resists dealing with the findings in the PAC's reports. I think that such inaction is not a vast conspiracy to ignore Parliament, but arises from Whitehall's culture of the permanent Executive, as opposed to the transient culture of politicians and Governments.

Whitehall accepts the vast majority of the PAC's recommendations. Therefore, why do some Committee members—I am certainly one of them—think that Whitehall does not always act on our recommendations? The Amman embassy report provides one example of inaction. I should like briefly to consider why that might be. However, I should first apologise to the Ministry of Defence, because I shall be using it as an example.

As I said, there is a culture of permanence in the civil service. Those who staff its senior ranks generally depend for career advancement not on Ministers, who come and go, but on one another, on the Whitehall network and on conventions on seniority. I should not say it depends on Buggins's turn, although I just did. One gets the feeling that senior civil servants' advancement does not depend on Ministers, which is perhaps a good thing and is often regarded as a strength. It is good that civil servants, including senior civil servants, and advisers can give their advice without fear or favour, but it can also be a weakness.

Civil servants must deal with a different culture and think about a different hierarchy. They have a different way of ensuring that they get on in life, which means that they do not always listen to Ministers or act quickly on the instructions of Ministers, who come and go. Whitehall sticks together and resists attacks from outside. The more senior staff become, the more they depend on one another for advancement.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden mentioned the Committee's report this Session on a major Ministry of Defence project. Although I realise that the report is not part of today's motion, it revealed—not for the first time in defence procurement—a startling picture of chronic overspending, very poor control of contracts and lengthening delays in bringing contracts to fruition. It is not a new problem, which has been outlined also in previous reports on major projects. The Ministry of Defence is a chronic overspender and shows chronic poor management. The reports that we have had from it during my time on the Committee suggest that it resists criticism from the PAC. It never seems to improve. Our 51st report, on the MOD appropriation accounts, showed poor day-to-day management.

It should be a matter of shame to have to come before the PAC when accounts have been qualified. That should be avoided at all costs by any self-respecting accounting officer, but the MOD regularly comes before the Committee. It has overspent its appropriation accounts in five of the past 10 years. When there are excess votes, they are from the MOD more often than not. It sometimes even overspends its excess votes.

The 51st report highlighted many significant day-to-day issues, illustrating the fact that the Ministry seems not to have a grip on its spending. One increase in spending that should have required Treasury authority—the decontamination of an MOD site at Waltham Abbey—went ahead without the Ministry following the rules to secure that authority. Another reason for the accounts being qualified was that the MOD was unable to account for the day-to-day payment of its military personnel. Suspense accounts had to be closed because they could not be balanced, resulting in £40 million having to be written off. The new account established as a replacement was out of control within weeks and could not be balanced, leading to another write-off of £19.5 million. Almost every time the MOD comes before the Committee, we see its failure to control its spending.

[Maria Eagle]

When we question them, representatives of the Ministry do not like to admit that they have done anything wrong. They tend to resist questioning that suggests that they should be fairly humble and should look for a way to improve. The major projects report—which should not be mentioned in the debate, but I am the second person to refer to it—is illustrative. It quotes some of the criticisms that the PAC made 100 years ago. The complaints that have been made over the past few years are in the same vein. The Ministry believes that it is too important to have to worry too much about controlling its expenditure. It is dealing with the defence of the realm, after all. The Committee is not as effective as we would like. We can congratulate ourselves on being effective in some ways, but we have not managed to change the culture of the MOD and make the civil servants and accounting officers understand that appropriation accounts are not targets to be aimed at, but absolute limits to be kept. As I have tried to illustrate, the problems go wider than just appropriation accounts.

We produced a report on the sale of the married quarters dealing with the amazing phenomenon of a Ministry selling houses for vastly less than they were worth—£77 million to £136 million less than a cautious valuation. There was no competition and they were sold in a job lot to one outfit—Annington Homes, as I recall. They were not properly sold, because the Ministry managed to retain liability not only to repair the properties—imagine selling a house and still having to repair it—but to pay rent on the properties that were vacant but not declared surplus. Having sold the properties, the Ministry took long leases back on them. What is the point of doing that? Even in a big project in which a job lot of houses was sold, the Ministry showed itself unable to consider properly the matter of accounting for public money and ensuring that we get value for it.

I do not want just to be unpleasant to the Ministry of Defence. I want to move to another Department to consider whether Departments learn from their mistakes when faced with a value-for-money report from the NAO and scrutiny from the PAC. Is there an identifiable change in their subsequent behaviour? Do they listen to us, learn and make changes? To illustrate that, I shall consider the NHS executive and its information technology procurement.

I am sorry to hear that my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) cannot speak today. He made the analogy of standing up and walking into a brick wall and asked what would be thought if someone picked themselves up and did it again. Would the casual onlooker think that they were mad or drunk? The NHS executive did that three times on IT procurement with the Wessex health authority, then on the hospital information support systems and, perhaps most notorious of all, on the Read codes.

The report on that was particularly interesting. The issue is of great importance to the future of the NHS. The system will enable medical records and records of treatment to be put on computer—preferably on a common system throughout the NHS. One has only to outline that to realise what a vast undertaking it is and what a difficult job it might be. The codes are ways of classifying particular treatments, outcomes or other items that should be in health records. They have to be common and everyone who might access the system has to understand it and be able to use it.

The Committee's 62nd report, on the purchase of the Read codes by the NHS executive and the management of the NHS centre for coding and classification which deals with them, is damning. Some £32 million has been spent so far on developing a system about which many of us who examined the evidence are dubious. I do not have confidence that Read version 3 will ever work. It has not yet been implemented. To our knowledge, it has been trialled in 12 NHS units. I have no evidence that version 3 has suddenly spread beyond that into general use. If that happened, it would cost many millions of pounds more to implement across the NHS.

The report is damning not just because of the £32 million that has been spent without any business case being made for the development of the codes. The money has been spent with no clear development plan or time scales. There was also a clear conflict of interest, because Dr. Read, who developed the codes, was paid to hand over the copyright and was then appointed to run the NHS outfit that would develop them, while his private company had sole rights to sell them. Dr. Read has been estimated to have made about £8 million so far, although I do not know how accurate that press report was.

The NHS executive had already suffered two seriously embarrassing reports from the Committee on IT procurement, but it got itself into a similar problem, if not a worse one, on the same issue. Since the publication of the report, the NHS executive has sought to justify its position, despite the clear worries in the NHS and among those who follow such issues in the computing world that Read codes will never work. Has the NHS executive taken that on board and learnt from the report? Do Departments ever accept that too much money has been spent on a system that will not work, and decide to bite the bullet and abandon it in favour of something else? So far, as far as we are aware, the NHS is continuing to develop the Read codes.

Mr. Alan Williams: Is that point not emphasised by the fact that, several times during the Committee's sitting, the NHS executive witness said that there had been no conflict of interest, whereas Dr. Read himself said that there had been a conflict of interest?

Maria Eagle: My right hon. Friend has a very good memory. He is right to say that there was a contradiction in the evidence. As the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West pointed out, Whitehall can sometimes produce obstructive responses to our reports. Although the people who took decisions and gave advice are defensive of their actions, and do not want to admit that they were wrong, if the Committee is to be effective and produce improvements, they sometimes have to do so. I hope that, next year, problems will be identified and people will say, "Mea culpa," promise to put things right and then do so. I do not blame Ministers of any party; it is the culture of Whitehall to say, "We are running this. We rather resent you looking too closely at it and, if you criticise us, we shall defend ourselves."

I hope that the Government will encourage Whitehall and its permanent staff to be less uptight and more objective and to make sure that the lessons that the PAC

and the National Audit Office can bring to the implementation of public policy and spending public money are well learned, so that we all benefit.

2.52 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South–West Hertfordshire): I took the precaution of looking at the *Hansard* reports of the last few annual debates on public accounts, including my own immortal words. I discovered that, almost every year, I started my speech by saying how disappointing it was that so few people had attended the debate. This year, I have to alter my start line because there are a few more of us. I hope that that trend continues, because it is a significant debate that sends an important message to the mandarins in Whitehall.

I start by welcoming the Minister to her new position. She has moved from small businesses to big businesses. I can tell her that the problems are the same; it is just the amount of money that is different, and it will be more dramatic if she gets things right—or indeed, if she gets them wrong.

Before dealing with the report, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the PAC, for guiding our Committee through the previous year. He has a contrasting style to his predecessor, but all roads lead to Rome and I am glad to say that the Committee produced some hard-hitting and effective reports with unanimity. Ever since I have been on the Committee, 100 per cent. of the Committee has endorsed its reports. I was first on the Committee in 1987 and I believe that our unanimity gives us strength. United we stand and divided we fall. We must make sure that, whenever possible, our reports are 100 per cent. endorsed.

I also thank the PAC staff—led by Ken Brown—who have always provided an effective and efficient service, for which we are exceedingly grateful.

My few words will follow in the footsteps of my right hon. Friend the Chairman. Obviously, that is a wise and sensible thing to do. It also involves a degree of crawling in that I hope that I shall be called to speak in the Committee earlier rather than later, so that all my ideas and questions will not have been taken by others. However, I mildly disagree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) in that, although I wish my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden every success, I would be quite happy if his tenure were for only three years, but time will tell.

Of course, the Committee would not be able to function without the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir John Bourn, and his highly professional staff in the National Audit Office. I have every respect for their skills and for the way in which they report their findings to the Committee. Their skill and expertise are recognised by many countries throughout the world, who call on the National Audit Office for help and advice.

The Committee needs to recognise that the reports that come before us are the product of a long process of investigation and the result of negotiations between the Department, public body or agency under scrutiny. Naturally, those bodies are not anxious to be severely criticised and usually argue, as I know from experience, for potentially damaging comments or statements to be reworded by what could be described as a process of plea bargaining. That sometimes makes the task of reading the NAO reports rather like the old art of Kremlinology: one has to be able to read between the lines to find out where there have been disputes. I am not complaining about that. It is part of what makes being a member of the Public Accounts Committee a little more challenging and makes one work a little harder.

Today, I shall concentrate more on the way in which the PAC operates than on the reports themselves, as I believe that there is room for advancement. I promise the House that there has been no collusion between myself and my right hon. Friend the Chairman, except on one small aspect, which I shall raise at the end of my speech.

I am concerned about the questions and potential conflicts that are posed by the Government's rushed devolution measures. Already, many regard the establishment of a Scottish Parliament as a stepping stone to Scottish separation. It is important that national sentiment is not allowed to block access by the NAO and PAC to how the money has been employed. The hon. Member for Garston said that we should have the power to follow wherever the money goes, and I am greatly concerned that shutters will be brought down to stop us doing that.

I understand that, under the Barnett formula, there is considerable financial support for Scotland—above the average amount per head that applies in England. If those extra sums of money are allowed to continue, the NAO should be allowed to follow the financial trail. I should also emphasise that the skills and ability that have been built up by the NAO over the years should not lightly be put to one side in a misplaced enthusiasm to have everything under Scottish control.

My first main point regarding the operation of the Committee concerns the way in which reports are brought before the Committee. I believe that, when we consider a report, the accounting officer responsible for that report should be there to answer questions. How many times has the Committee found that, within seconds of a report hitting the desk, the accounting officer has either moved or retired to Chichester to tend his roses? I believe that all retired accounting officers go there and the new man sits in front of us and says with much sucking of teeth, "I agree with you. It is a deplorable situation. However, I am new to the job and that is what I will do to put it right." We, being a lot of softies, say, "It is not his fault, is it? We can't be hard on him." Therefore, we tend to be too kind and forgiving.

I believe that it should be the norm and the custom and not an exception to call former accounting officers back to be examined on their records in their Departments or agencies. There should be no hiding place or escape route if commitments given in the past to the Public Accounts Committee in good faith are not honoured. We are entitled to question those responsible for the implementation of those policies.

I wish to refer to my concerns regarding what I call the fire-and-forget principle on which the Committee operates. There are varying degrees of noise, lightning flashes and smoke when a National Audit Office report is published and is followed by the Public Accounts Committee inquiry. It is then usually followed by a period—perhaps years—of deafening silence. We have no idea of what is going on, or of whether the recommendations have been implemented. We have no idea whether they have been successful or not. All too

[Mr. Richard Page]

often the matters are revisited years later by the Committee, and we find that little has been done to alter the way in which the Department has been tackling those problems.

One of the advantages, or disadvantages, of serving on the Committee for some 10 years, as I have—I know that the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) has served even longer—is that one sees the same problems coming around time and time again. As an example, the House should consider the difficulties faced by the Child Support Agency in collecting maintenance payments from absent parents. The subject will be familiar to all right hon. and hon. Members, as we have all had surgeries full of people complaining about the way in which the CSA has operated.

Successive chief executives and accounting officers of the CSA explained to us how they would deal with the backlog of cases, incorrect assessments and appeals. The message consistently was that the problem was being solved. Unfortunately, as the PAC work in the early months of 1998 revealed, the situation has not significantly improved since the earlier days of the CSA work. Now, the Department of Social Security, the CSA and—more importantly—taxpayers are having to face writing off much of the uncollected arrears accumulated during the previous and present Parliaments. That is the penalty that we are paying for the insufficient attention that has been paid to the Committee's reports. We heard assurances during our last examination, but I have serious doubts that we shall find the situation improved at all in the future.

It is possible to cite several other examples. We looked several months ago at the problems that the same Department was facing over the transfer of data from the old computer system for national insurance contributions to the new one. There had been technical difficulties with that in earlier stages. Like other members of the Committee, I was sceptical about the likelihood of the target date for completion of the operation being met, as it was less than two months away. We were assured by the witness that the target would be met but, within weeks, it was announced that the completion date had had to be put back—at a cost of many millions of pounds.

It is not in the public interest for the PAC to be offered what I can describe only as a hopeful statement about solving a problem. It would be far better to tell us the facts and the odds that a solution will not be forthcoming. In turn, that would enable the Government and the Minister involved to do something about the problem.

The Committee took the unusual step in its last report—on the procurement of major Ministry of Defence projects—of producing a summary of previcus reports, going back over decades, to show that the same mistakes were being made time and time again. It appears that the Ministry of Defence has been quite happy just to proceed as if the reports had no relevance. This time, we have been told that the smart procurement initiative will solve the problems of cost overruns and delays before major projects enter service. I hope I that am wrong, but I am cynical. I will not be holding my breath about this matter.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I wonder whether I might put to my hon. Friend a suggestion that will cause ripples throughout Whitehall. Does he think that an accounting officer who has been in charge of such a gross financial mismanagement ought to be subject to no further preferment?

Mr. Page: I would not want to fire such an Exocet until I was thoroughly satisfied that the situation was completely and utterly in the hands of that particular accounting officer. There may have been the beneficial and guiding hand of a Minister behind him which has prevented certain things from happening. Tempting as my hon. Friend's suggestion might be, I would want to make sure that we were targeting a genuine wrongdoer, rather than someone who has been put into a set of circumstances that may not be completely of his own doing.

There have been times when senior civil servants have admitted that mistakes have been made. The Committee had the classic example this year of a serious case in the British embassy in Amman. Having been reassured by the former permanent under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office that new, tighter proceedings would mean that such a thing could never happen again, within a short time we had a second example of embezzlement, which caused a great many red faces in the Department.

I shall draw my remarks to a close, although the wealth of material is such that one could filibuster about the PAC and its activities for hours on end. However, I wish to touch on the various references to the situation within the EU at the moment, the discussions about fraud and the problem, which is occupying the headlines, of the hundreds of millions of pounds that have been misappropriated. I find it most peculiar that the European Parliament can elect Commissioners one by one, but can sack them only en bloc. That seems to me to be a crazy situation. Surely the Parliament should be able to direct its fire on one or two particular Commissioners if they seem to be failing in their particular tasks.

The Committee Chairman mentioned the need for an EU anti-fraud squad, and I should be more than happy to endorse that. However, it does not go far enough, and more is needed. The European Court of Auditors signs off the accounts and points out if there has been a fraud, but it goes no further. It does not have a value-for-money aspect. Our National Audit Office, and our forms of government accounting, took a step forward in 1983 when we introduced value for money and the examination of the three criteria of economy, effectiveness and efficiency. Since then, we have seen how the Government can spend money in a more effective way, which benefits the taxpayer.

The one slight collusion between myself and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden is to ask whether we should recommend that we go over to Brussels and visit the European Court of Auditors to talk to people. That would do two things—first, we could give them some of the benefit of our experiences, and secondly, we could learn about some of their problems, which would help us, in turn, to see that we, as a nation, spend EU money more effectively.

I believe that the Committee has worked hard and diligently through the year, and I have no doubt that it will have plenty to do in the year to come.

3.9 pm

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this first debate on our new Thursdays. I join others in paying tribute to the Chairman of the Committee, the Clerk and all his staff, and pay particular tribute to the Chairman for the way in which he has guided and helped us all over the past year and more.

Yesterday, during a debate initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on Select Committee reform, requests were made for more time for debates on reports of Select Committees on the Floor of the House. A number of speakers emphasised the importance of such debates to scrutiny of the Executive. That makes me all the more pleased to speak in today's debate.

In my short speech, I shall concentrate on two reports: the 61st, "Getting Value for Money in Privatisations", and the 27th, "Measures to Combat Housing Benefit Fraud". My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), both here and in the Committee, has used the "banging your head against a wall" analogy, and that is certainly my experience as a member of the Committee. One learns that banging one's head against the wall hurts, and that not doing so does not hurt; the problem is getting others to understand that, and to stop banging their heads—and, inevitably, ours—against the wall.

That brings me to the 61st report, which identified a number of key lessons to be learnt in the selling of public assets. The Government welcomed that in a Treasury minute, and it is to be hoped that we and they learn from past experience when it comes to the sale of shares in the Commonwealth Development Corporation, National Air Traffic Services and Belfast port. Otherwise, the public will lose out.

Billions of pounds of public money were lost as a result of the failure to follow the PAC's recommendations in regard to selling shares in stages. That has already been mentioned today. In 1986 and 1987, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Transport sold British Airways and the British Airports Authority. When the PAC reviewed the sale in 1987-88, it recommended that Departments should consider the phased sale by tranche that was used successfully in the sale of British Aerospace and Associated British Ports. As we have seen, the Government did not learn that lesson. In 1990, the DTI sold the regional electricity companies. Reviewing those sales in 1992-93, the Committee regretted that a phased sale had not been undertaken. I am not discussing the merits or otherwise of privatisation, because that is not the Committee's brief; I am talking about the effects of it.

It seemed that someone had learned that banging one's head against a wall hurts. In 1991, only 60 per cent. of PowerGen and National Power was sold by the DTI. In 1996-97, the report on the sale of the remaining 40 per cent., which had taken place in 1995, revealed that an additional £2.3 billion had been realised because not all the shares had been sold in 1991. Some lessons have been learnt; but a National Audit Office report published on 16 December last year, which the Committee has yet to consider, reveals that the sale of Railtrack in May 1996 would have raised an extra £600 million if 20 per cent. of the shares had been retained and sold later. We all know that the sale of Railtrack was governed by more than the concept of raising money. It is likely that the taxpayer lost millions if not billions of pounds, because other factors were involved—but perhaps that is more head-banging.

How are Departments to be induced, encouraged or instructed to learn the lessons, and to implement the findings that the PAC worked so hard to obtain? The Treasury minute in response to the 61st report says:

"The Treasury will ensure that the lessons set out in this report are drawn to the attention of all departments involved in sales and reflected in guidance for departments."

That is good, but how do we ensure that the guidance is followed? I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that, as well as guidance for Departments, there should be a checklist outlining the procedure that should be followed when a sale is made, and the issues that should be considered at each stage. That would allow future sales to be audited better. Departments would have to provide evidence that they had considered all relevant matters at each stage, and give reasons for decisions that were made.

I agree with my Conservative colleagues on the Committee that, all too often, the official appearing before it had nothing to do with the process that is being reviewed. If a checklist were introduced and could be monitored, it would be possible to ensure that guidance had been followed; otherwise, we would want to know the reason why. That should minimise the wasting of public money.

In the 27th report, on measures to combat housing benefit fraud, the issue was examined for the second time in seven years. It was revealed that more than £900 million had been lost as a result of fraud. The Department of Social Security was not even able to show whether fraud was on the increase, and could not provide all the information that was needed about types of fraud, including landlord fraud, and about variations at regional and local level. That essential information simply was not available. The absence of such reliable information should cast doubt on decisions made by the Department to invest in anti-fraud work. If it did not have the information that it needed, how could it be sure that its investment was targeted correctly?

The Government have committed themselves to reducing fraud in public finances. That commitment is intended to produce a welfare state that is fit for the new millennium that we shall enter in less than 12 months. An important part of the fight to reduce poverty and welfare dependency is the battle against fraud, which is founded on three principles. The first is fairness, and the restoration of public confidence in a social security system that ensures that benefits go to those who need them rather than those who seek to profit at the expense of the needy. The second is responsibility: fraud is anti-social, and that is contrary to responsible citizenship. Government assistance to the drive against fraud is the right expression of responsible citizenship. The third is honesty—ensuring public confidence in a social security system that deals effectively with those who act dishonestly.

The PAC has a crucial role to play in all that. Admittedly, it will involve taking a backward look, but the information is there, because of the work of the National Audit Office. The Committee can also seek and receive assurances that past mistakes and bad practice will not be repeated.

What we have not secured, over many years, is a cast-iron guarantee of the implementation of those assurances. Officials come and go, and it seems that, if a

[Jane Griffiths]

new official does not do what the last one recommended, there are few sanctions, and there is little opportunity for the Government to act.

The Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997 was a big step, perhaps the biggest that any Government have taken in the fight to reduce housing benefit fraud. I am sure that all members of the Committee, and other hon. Members, welcome the strong new powers given to the DSS and local authorities to tackle such fraud. The PAC rightly noted that those who design benefit systems

"have to strike the right balance between addressing different needs equitably and fairly on the one hand and simplicity and security on the other. However, the present system does not find the right balance."

The Government are undertaking a fundamental review of housing benefit and its relationship to housing policy. I urge Ministers to note document HC 164 1997/98—also called "Measures to Combat Housing Benefit Fraud"—and the subsequent 27th report of the PAC as part of the process.

Like other Committee members, I welcome the establishment of the benefit fraud inspectorate, and its aim to drive up standards in anti-fraud work by inspecting individual local authorities. I am not aware of any local authority that has been inspected that regards the process as anything but helpful. It is right and proper that, following inspectorate action, all local authorities are required to provide the Secretary of State with action plans.

It is also right that, if the Secretary of State considers that a local authority has failed to respond sufficiently to the inspectorate's recommendations, or has failed to carry out its action plan, he or she can decide to issue directions to that authority. If that authority does not respond to the directions, there are powers to impose subsidy sanctions, or, in extreme cases, compulsory outsourcing of benefit delivery services—I think that that is privatisation. In addition, both the inspectorate's sharing of lessons that have been learnt in its inspection with other authorities and the exchange of good practices can only be helpful in the fight against housing benefit fraud.

In October, the Government statistical service published the results from the 1997-98 national housing benefit accuracy review. Although the report was welcome, the results made gloomy reading. The main findings were that, on average, 16 per cent. of housing benefit claimants receive incorrect payments; that includes both under and over-payments. The cost of that to the taxpayer is £840 million a year.

There are several ways in which that £840 million a year is lost—official error, claimant error, mildly suspected fraud, strongly suspected fraud—and that is only the money lost that we know about. Prevention is the key to cutting benefit fraud.

I am pleased to note that 85 local authorities are improving the standard of initial evidence that is gathered at the start of housing benefit claims—it seems self-evident that, if a claim looks dodgy, officers should not go any further with it—through the new verification framework. It is also welcome that £200,000 of Government money is being used to pilot a new initiative where local authorities will, for the first time, I believe, be able to use Department of Social Security solicitors to prosecute housing benefit fraudsters.

The commitment to put in place training from April 1999 to improve the skills of fraud investigators is welcome, but—here is another warning from the Public Accounts Committee:

"Fear of detection can be an effective deterrent against committing fraud, but only if it is backed up by sufficient prosecutions and effective penalties. Yet the level of prosecutions by local authorities is incredibly low, at under 1 per cent. of detected frauds, and suspected fraudsters have a 99 per cent. chance of getting off Scot free."

It is like saying, "Mr. Fraudster, come here. There is a coffer of public money for you. Just take what you want." Can my right hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench assure me that the Government are willing to commit the resources that are necessary to ensure that 99 per cent. of fraudsters do not get off scot free?

I take great encouragement from the fact that we are having the debate and from the way in which the House's business has been arranged on this new Thursday. I hope that, as the House considers further modernisation of its working practices, hon. Members on both sides of the House will have further and increased opportunity to debate Select Committee reports and thereby question and hold to account the Government of the day, based on cross-party findings and reports.

3.23 pm

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): It is clear from what has been said in the debate that there is agreement among hon. Members on both sides of the House that both the volume and incisive quality of the National Audit Office case load that is served up to the Committee by its excellent Committee Clerk are formidable. So is the chairmanship of the Committee by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). Not one of us on the Committee failed to find himself on the receiving end of a little yellow piece of paper when we were in danger of over-running our allotted time. On that paper were the words, "One minute", so it was fun this afternoon to return the compliment in kind to the Chairman.

It would be worth drawing the House's attention to a wide range of subjects, but I should like to make some general comments first and then to focus on a few specific reports.

My first comment has already been headlined by the Committee Chairman and others, and I make no apology for repeating it for emphasis. There is a continuing pressing requirement for an extension of the Comptroller and Auditor General's remit to allow him access for audit purposes to sectors of public expenditure that he cannot currently examine.

If he is to be fully effective in his responsibilities and to present a complete picture of how taxpayers' money is being spent, the CAG needs not only access to non-departmental public bodies that are audited by private firms which are appointed by the relevant Secretary of State, but access, without hindrance or hassle, to private companies that take on work that is contracted out by central Government and paid for by the taxpayer.

The CAG should be able to pursue his investigations in local spending bodies, public sector companies, recipients of Government and EU grants, housing associations and many other such organisations. It should be a standard condition of all Government contracts that the CAG has the right to inspect the contractor's books where he considers it necessary.

My second observation is about the ability of the Public Accounts Committee to question consultants or professional advisers, along with the relevant accounting officer, when taking evidence. I believe that several Committee colleagues would agree that we could have done a better job probing where the use of public funds may have gone awry if we had been able to question such consultants.

I understand that merchant bank advisers or consultants may appear before the Committee in the near future. I hope that the Minister, whom I congratulate on her appointment to the Treasury, will agree that it could improve accountability if we could vet some of the consultants and advisers.

My third general observation is a small, but, I hope, constructive criticism about appropriation accounts. All too often, the format of those accounts is anything but user friendly to anyone but professional accountants and a few officials in the know. As they are public documents, it would be helpful if the accounts were presented in a less obscure fashion.

My fourth observation is a word of praise for the chief accountancy adviser to the Treasury and his resource accounting team. That has been touched on by the Chairman and others today, but it is worth emphasising.

The Committee's 67th report provides detailed evidence from the chief accountancy adviser of the basis on which financial management in Whitehall can be modernised. I hope that the House will keep in mind the key advantages that the Treasury plans to deliver when Whitehall switches to resource accounting. I am delighted that the Government are continuing the work on resource accounting that was begun by the previous Government.

There should be better management information about costs and assets, greater scope to control working capital and cash flow, a chance to focus on outputs as well as inputs and a more switched-on approach to financial control systems. That should empower middle-management ranks in the civil service as well as senior officials if it is used properly.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) spoke about Whitehall culture being difficult to change. If there is one initiative that will bring about welcome changes in the Whitehall management culture, it is resource accounting. It will enable the Government of the day to allocate resources in the public expenditure round more rationally if they so choose.

It is sometimes said that some members of the Committee, myself included, are readier to criticise witnesses than to praise them. I hope that my praise for the resource accounting team shows that credit is given where credit is due. I am sure that colleagues would agree that there have been other instances during the previous Session when witnesses have been warmly commended. Her Majesty's Coastguard is one example that comes to mind. However, it has to be said that the preponderance of NAO reports that are considered by the Committee draw attention to cock-ups, confusion, inaction and inefficiency. It is right that we should give vent to our criticism where it is intended to be constructive.

The Committee report that leaps out for attention and is highly topical, bearing in mind this week's debate in Strasbourg, is the 35th report, which is on the 1996 annual report of the European Court of Auditors. I could not find a Treasury minute responding to that report, but this week's protests from Members of the European Parliament, although they proved to be in vain today, rightly put Jacques Santer and his commissioners in the dock for many of the same reasons that prompted the Committee to condemn the EC's hopelessly inept and corrupt financial performance in the previous year. For several years, the Court of Auditors has been unable to provide a positive assurance on the legality and regularity of Community payments. The Public Accounts Committee endorsed the damning verdict from the Comptroller and Auditor General that the European Commission still has a long way to go before it attains the quality of financial reporting expected as the norm for Government accounts in this country.

The Committee expressed concern about, among other things, the high level of unnecessary expenditure resulting from the failure of common agriculture policy regulations to take account of movements in world market prices. It was also worried that the systems for ensuring that recovery of customs duties payable to the European Commission did not operate effectively, and about the high level of errors and delays in structural fund payments.

In short, the Committee drew attention to a complete shambles at the Commission. Although total expenditure in 1996 was a relatively modest £57 billion, the House cannot ignore the Commission's transparent ambition, following hard on the introduction of the single currency and European monetary union, first to harmonise EU taxation and then to ensure that the greater part of taxation is raised at the federal centre rather than within member states. Therefore, it is fundamentally important that we make known such criticisms of the administration in Brussels.

Sometimes the European sickness of chronic maladministration, highlighted this week in Strasbourg, affects the United Kingdom directly. The Committee's 52nd report revealed that the Intervention Board Agency, which accounts to Parliament for the £4.2 billion gross cost of implementing CAP measures in this country, could not reconcile transactions of £30 million on its accounts, and that it had spent almost £11 million—a figure that beggars belief—on consultants in a failed attempt to balance its books. However, no one at the agency felt the need to resign to atone for those shortcomings.

The 33rd report, into the Crown Prosecution Service, revealed a similar determination on the part of its then director to shrug off responsibility for the failure to establish a computer system to keep track of cases across the service. In spite of a virtuoso performance of self-advocacy before the Committee, the director lost her job shortly afterwards. I do not think that that was down to the Committee directly, but at least there was some action in that case.

No such fate befell the permanent secretary at the Foreign Office or his director of resources, who feature in the 34th report. Unfortunately for them, as we heard earlier, they had to explain away a horror story involving a false payments scam at the British embassy in Amman, Jordan. That was barely a year after the permanent secretary's predecessor had blandly assured the Committee that financial controls in Amman were all hunky-dory, even though the embassy had been taken for an embarrassing ride in connection with bogus pension payments. I do not think that anyone ever got to the bottom of that scam.

[Mr. Charles Wardle]

The Committee hearing with the accounting officer from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Sir John Kerr, attracted some defensive letters to the press from old FCO hands, but those letters made their authors sound fearfully old fashioned. I am pleased to say that a video of the session in which the Committee took evidence from the permanent secretary—I nearly said of its interrogation of him—is now used as a case study by the Civil Service College.

I should add that, to his credit, Sir John Kerr—for whom I have the highest personal regard—has sought to rid the Foreign Office of its previous rather haughty indifference to the need for professional financial management by appointing a squad of qualified accountants and young executive types with masters degrees in business administration. They have replaced the amateur generalists who, after two weeks' training, were traditionally put in charge of the books. I am sure that those changes are to be welcomed. They will help remind our diplomats that, although they do an absolutely excellent job for the United Kingdom abroad, they incur an expense for taxpayers whenever they represent our country.

The 43rd report showed that the taxpayer was treated much more shabbily, both in the scale of the rip-off and in terms of barefaced greed, by the privatisation of Belfast international airport. In a management buy-out, a team of civil servants were able to pay £32.7 million for the airport. Just two years later, they sold it at a profit of £74 million, with no clawback for the taxpayer. As I said in Committee at the time, I am all for people getting rich through hard work, but the group gained more than £3 million a month during its brief ownership of the airport. That was a cynical exercise in profiteering, over which there were scarcely any checks. Given the rather terse official response to the Committee's criticisms of that case, I am sorry to say that it was difficult to judge whether lessons essential to the taxpayer's future wellbeing had been learned.

Finally, I turn to the 37th report on contingent liabilities in the dependent territories. The Foreign Office's responsibilities for governance, disaster preparedness, risk management and financial controls are diverse, and it cannot be easy to maintain improvements. However, the most pressing concern is drug trafficking. The Committee was told that 30 per cent. of the cocaine reaching the UK comes via the Caribbean. The United Nations estimates that 400 tonnes of cocaine destined for the United States and Europe transits the Caribbean.

The Foreign Office, with the help of the National Criminal Intelligence Service, and two Royal Navy frigates, is helping the five Caribbean dependent territories to resist drug trafficking but, ominously, Sir John Kerr told the Committee that the fight against drugs is taken less seriously in some independent Caribbean countries than in the dependent territories.

Among the former British colonies and protectorates in the Caribbean, Belize—formerly British Honduras—became especially vulnerable to drugs transhipment after the British defence forces withdrew in 1994. As other countries in the region have begun to tighten their efforts against narcotics, there is no doubt that traffickers exploit Belize, which is a convenient back door to the cocaine route to the United States via Mexico, Jamaica or the Cayman Islands.

As the United States Drug Enforcement Administration has confirmed, Belize has a long unprotected coast line, large tracts of rainforest and unpopulated areas that facilitate the movement of much of the south American cocaine trade to the United States market. I hope that a future NAO report will consider the effectiveness with which British taxpayers' money is deployed to help resist drug trafficking in the wider Caribbean area and not just in the dependent territories.

There is no doubt that there is growing public awareness and interest in clearer accountability from those who spend taxpayers' money. Demands on the National Audit Office will undoubtedly grow but I am sure that it will respond well to the challenge. Whitehall will face inescapably greater pressure to reform and modernise its financial and management controls. That reform is long overdue, and can only be a good thing.

3.38 pm

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): In 1799, a Tory Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, introduced income tax in this country, in part to fund the Napoleonic war. The Inland Revenue has commemorated that momentous innovation with an exhibition at Somerset house, although I am sorry to say that tomorrow is the last day on which it will be open to the public.

Some people may say that we should not celebrate the invention of income tax. People may call me eccentric, but I resent paying my income tax least of all the bills that come through my door because, as a Member of Parliament, I have a fairly good idea about where my income tax is spent. It is spent on schools, hospitals, social housing, transport and all the other vital public services without which we would all be a lot poorer.

After about 200 years of income tax, it is important that we recognise that the main public sector safety valve ensuring that taxpayers' money is spent efficiently and effectively and that it achieves value for money is the Public Accounts Committee, working in co-operation with the National Audit Office.

I was privileged to serve on the Public Accounts Committee until November last year, when I moved on to pastures new. The Committee certainly provided me with a great education in how government works, where money is spent and problems can occur and what solutions might be available. I join other hon. Members in paying tribute and thanks to the staff of the PAC as well as to Sir John Bourn, the Comptroller and Auditor General and the other staff of the National Audit Office for all their excellent advice and assistance in the previous Session. I also pay tribute to the chairman of the PAC, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), for all his help and assistance and for his impressive scrutiny and his collegiate approach throughout our non-partisan hearings.

About a tonne of reports must have been produced from the many hearings. The evidence is on the Table, which is weighed down by the bulk of blue paper that the Committee approved, often paragraph by paragraph, in many of our sittings. So we have worked hard. I cannot go into all of the reports, but I will focus my attention on some of the most important findings of the past year. Unsurprisingly, most relate to privatisations, to which other hon. Members have referred.

The findings on water privatisation have not been mentioned. A year ago, the PAC heard evidence from the Office of Water Services into the regulation of the quality of services for customers. We questioned Mr. Ian Byatt, the Director General of Water Services, about his duty to secure the proper financing by water companies of quality water and sewerage functions and the fact that that depends on getting the privatised companies to give priority to reinvestment in the utility's infrastructure. Clearly, Ofwat regarded the main trade-off as finding ways to get money to the customer, by ensuring that prices were reduced, or to get companies to spend their resources on infrastructure, the drainage network and so forth.

Those are not the only options for those companies, which are making a large profit. In that hearing, we learned that massive dividends were paid out to shareholders. The profits were leaking out of the water companies. Rather than being reinvested in better-quality services, the money was going to the shareholder. Two interesting statistics came out during the hearing. More than two thirds of the total pre-tax profits of the water companies go out of the industry into dividends, so it is not reinvesting as much as it should be. That has meant that, on average, nearly a quarter of the typical customer's bill has gone straight to finance dividend payments.

The PAC's 36th report concluded that dividend payments were at an unacceptable and unsustainable level, potentially putting at risk investment and the quality of services to customers. Therefore, we recommended that Ofwat, in particular, should consider instituting further safeguards to protect customers.

Ofwat has responded fairly well, by reiterating its belief in RPI minus X as a regulatory system and saying that

"dividend policy should be transparent and must not put at risk the companies' ability to discharge their functions".

We must reconsider, though, how better to ensure that price cuts and infrastructure investments are achieved as a matter of priority and that profits are not put before the services that need to be provided to the customer.

The other privatisation inquiry that stands out most clearly in my mind was that into the railway rolling stock companies. I do not know whether hon. Members saw on the news yesterday that a baseball hit by Mark McGwire, which set the record-breaking 70th major league home run, was sold in New York for £1.65 million by the man in the stand who had caught it. Anyone who thinks that that was a fortuitous windfall may not have heard the story of the railway rolling stock companies and the few former British Rail managers—three in particular—who made an absolute killing during the privatisation exercise. For example, Mr. Jukes from Forward Trust, which is now called Eversholt, invested £110,000 as his initial stake and sold the company on only 12 months later for a personal profit of £15.9 million. Mr. Anderson of Porterbrook put in £120,000 and sold the company after only eight months for £33.5 million. Dr. Prideaux of Angel put in no money—he got the banks to front the company—and received £15 million.

It was enlightening to have the opportunity to question those three former British Rail managers about why they deserved that windfall. What special effort had they put in to earn that amount of money? The answer given to the PAC was that the risk that they had taken justified the massive return. When asked whether they deserved the profit or felt a little guilty at having ripped off taxpayers so massively, it was not surprising that we did not get much of a response.

What annoys me, the public and other members of the PAC most is that the assets—the family silver—could be sold off by the previous Government at such an undervalued rate. They were almost given away. Those people made all that profit because, when they sold, the market recognised the true value. Unfortunately, the taxpayer did not get the money. That is why, in that report and subsequently, we looked into ways to reduce such windfalls. I was glad to see in the Treasury minute on that report that the Government accept that those windfall gains certainly risk discrediting privatisation and that they

"will consider carefully in future sales mechanisms to prevent any purchasers from enjoying excessive windfall gains."

Such mechanisms are sometimes known as the clawback clause and we need to use those arrangements much more frequently.

Many other aspects of privatisation were raised in our hearings. Hon. Members have mentioned our over-arching report into value for money in privatisations. One aspect of that is a clawback arrangement that will ensure, particularly when high levels of uncertainty are associated with the sales, that we build into contracts ways to get the windfall right for the taxpayer and the Government. Another recommendation is that we must value companies properly in the first place, to ensure that the best price tag is put on them before privatisation so that the proper market value is gained for the taxpayer and that we do not merely give assets to the private sector because of dogma or ideology. If they are to be given away, there is a reason and there should be a gain to the public at large.

It is true that the report recommends that, if shares in privatisations have to be sold, it should be done in stages to test the market more effectively. I am glad to see signals that that is becoming a more acceptable practice for the public sector.

I do not think that any hon. Member has touched on the fact that the PAC recommended that close scrutiny should be given to pre-sale restructuring, so that the Government do not spend millions of pounds of taxpayers' money putting aspects of the public sector right and then hive them off to the private sector. If major amounts of public expenditure go on restructuring, the public should gain some reciprocal benefit.

On a number of issues, one felt that one could ask the same question of whatever witness came before the Committee. Advisers' and consultants' fees are always being raised in the PAC, and members of the Committee become exasperated. I think especially of the inquiry into design, build, finance and operate roads under the Department of Transport. We must consider advisers' and external consultants' fees throughout government to ensure that we always get value for money.

Fraud is part of the bread and butter of our inquiries. The right hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) reminded me of the fraud at the Amman embassy. Extrapolated downwards, the stationery budget equated to, I think, 300,000 biros. The amount of fraud on the mileage budget would have taken a car around the world 12 times—physically impossible in the time available. We must ensure that our accounting officers more rigorously monitor such day-to-day expenditure.

[Mr. Christopher Leslie]

Many other management issues and lessons emerged. Those lessons should be internalised in the day-to-day operations of the Government.

I was pleased by the development of the new public service agreements initiative which evolved from the comprehensive spending review in the summer. Contracts between the Treasury and Departments mean that extra cash is provided to secure not only the services but modernisation and reform of the way in which Departments operate and of the services that they provide. That is a strong step towards better incentives for best practice in Departments, and places more responsibility on accounting officers and Departments.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the news on fraud going around the European Union. That is a clear example of a lack of good democratic auditing procedures as strong as those that we have established over the many years that the Public Accounts Committee has been going and it has led to great problems in European institutions. As a strong European, I think that, if we need government in Europe, it must be publicly accountable and the money spent must clearly be shown to be good value for money and to have been efficiently and effectively spent. Developing auditing processes in the EU is important.

I had to come off the Public Accounts Committee in November. I learned a lot from it and am sad to leave, but I was pleased that today's speeches showed that the robust tradition of scrutiny and good accountability for public accounts will continue for many years to come.

3.54 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I echo the congratulations offered by my hon. Friends to the new Financial Secretary on her recent promotion. She has been very helpful to me on the issue to which I shall confine my remarks; it will come as no surprise to her that it is the subject of the Public Accounts Committee's 66th report, "Managing the Millennium Threat". It was published last July and the Treasury responded in October. Given its importance, I am sorry that the issue was not highlighted in the motion.

As the first hon. Member to raise the issue way back in 1995, I want to use this debate to warn that we are not doing enough and have not done enough to avoid problems that are now inevitable, as more and more experts are concluding. It is essential that contingency plans are in place well before the end of this year.

When I first raised the issue at Prime Minister's questions, the entire House fell about in response to the warning that I gave my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) about the consequences for business and Government if it was not addressed. I do not suppose that there were many in the House then who knew what I was talking about; most probably thought that what I was suggesting was silly, sensational and apocalyptic. To be honest, that had been my view. It was only because a constituent in the computer business had raised the issue with me at a surgery that I made inquiries and became convinced that he was right to be concerned that no one was responding adequately.

Although my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon did not refer to it in replying to my question, I had already learned from him that his Government were planning and implementing measures that were to put this country ahead of most others in terms of awareness and taking action in the public sector. That is contrary to the picture painted by Ministers of this Government, who suggest that they found the cupboard bare when they came into office. The proof of that, if it were necessary, can be found in the report of the National Audit Office published on 21 May 1997, "Managing the Millennium Threat", which was clearly prepared before the general election.

I accept that some of the answers that I received to the questions that I tabled to every Department in early 1996 were complacent and short on detail. However, as the NAO report confirmed, the central information technology unit of the Office of Public Service, supported by the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency, was ensuring that central Government were preparing our public services in good time to anticipate and avoid problems in the three years before the millennium.

In reply to my Adjournment debate in June 1996, the first detailed debate in the House on the matter, the Minister responsible for information technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), announced the establishment of TaskForce 2000, a Department of Trade and Industry-sponsored, private sector-financed public awareness campaign aimed at ensuring that British business would be millennium ready.

I apologise for harking back to the past, but, to my knowledge, no one has put the record straight in the House on the previous Government's response on the millennium bug. It is, of course, not mentioned in the 66th report. However, I stress, as I always have, that I do not believe that voluntary action by business, in response to DTI exhortation and the TaskForce 2000 campaign, will be enough to ensure our millennium readiness. That will have a knock-on effect on the provision of public services.

Such is the nature of the issue that it is not enough to ensure that the necessary action on the computer systems of Departments and public sector agencies, as well as those in the business sector, has been taken, including sufficient time to allow the testing essential to ensure millennium compliance. If the systems with which those computer systems are linked, such as those of their suppliers or receivers, are not compliant, theirs will also fail to perform after the first midnight of the new millennium. As is becoming more widely understood, it is an all-or-nothing situation. In a network of computer systems, the chain is strong as its weakest link. If one system is not compliant, all those with which it is linked are also at risk.

There will always be reluctance to disclose true millennium readiness, especially in the private sector. There are many reasons for that, including maintaining competitiveness, the risk of future legal liability and the difficulty of obtaining insurance. As the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee said, the civil servants who assured the Committee that we will be all right on the night next new year will not be around to pick up the pieces. That is why the Pledge 2000 initiative mentioned in the Treasury response, which the Government have signed, to the 66th report will prove not to be worth the paper on which the signatures are written.

The non-legally binding abstracts issued by the urgent issues task force sub-committee of the Accounting Standards Board on disclosures on millennium

compliance relating to business, to which the Financial Secretary referred in her reply to me last year in her previous role at the Department of Trade and Industry, will prove to be totally inadequate as the only yardstick of progress in this country. Both serve only to encourage over-optimistic and complacent conclusions that do not reflect the reality.

For the reasons that I have given, I felt that there was no alternative but to legislate to introduce a statutory requirement on company directors to assess the millennium compliance of their company's computer systems and to report the outcome of that assessment in their annual report to shareholders—the owners of the company—together with the action that they were taking to safeguard the company and the shareholders' investments in it if its systems were found not to recognise the year 2000. That was the object of the private Member's Bill, the Companies (Millennium Computer Compliance) Bill, which the House allowed me to introduce under the ten-minute rule procedure in November 1996. The Bill had reached its Report stage by the time of the general election. I had amended it in Committee in response to suggestions that I received from the top 100 companies that I had approached, many of which supported my Bill.

I contend that, if the previous Government had allowed my Bill to become law before the dissolution of Parliament, this country would now be far and away ahead of all others in the millennium readiness of both its public and private sectors. Company annual reports for the years ending 1998 and 1999 would have seen to that. Even the present Government had an opportunity to support the Bill when the House allowed me to reintroduce it in June 1997 after the general election. I appreciated the fact that the Minister courteously listened to my arguments on that occasion. Instead of supporting my Bill, the Government chose to suspend TaskForce 2000 before replacing it with Action 2000 almost six months later. In hindsight, I believe that that delay of almost six months will prove to have serious consequences in terms of missed targets and escalating costs.

The concerns about the millennium bug are reflected in the Public Accounts Committee's 66th report. It concludes:

"we cannot be sure that government business will not be disrupted in the year 2000 . . . we are concerned about the readiness of the wider public sector to cope with the Year 2000 issue".

In response to the Committee's concerns that the NHS executive could not give an assurance on the safety of patients, the Treasury was right to say that it would be dishonest to guarantee that there would not be a single unforeseen mishap. The truth is that no one can guarantee that, where date-related computer systems are involved, nothing will go wrong at the end of this year. No one knows for sure how widespread the year 2000 problem is likely to be.

We know that many modern computer systems are vulnerable to flawed software. Even Windows 98 is not millennium compliant unless action is taken and then tested, despite the assurances of Microsoft. The PAC was therefore right to urge in its report that the Office of Public Service should

"Ensure that contingency plans are in place, and are tested."

It said:

"We look to the Office of Public Service to require all public bodies to have comprehensive robust business continuity plans in place by January 1999."

The Treasury has responded by saying that a number of Departments and agencies have yet to begin work on dedicated year 2000 business continuity plans. I suspect that that situation applies throughout the entire public and private sectors of this country. There will be all too few contingency plans in place, and they will be too late to be effective.

We still have the time, just, to replace a reliance on a voluntary requirement to have in place contingency plans with a statutory one. That is why this morning I secured from the Public Bill Office the opportunity to introduce a new Bill under the ten-minute rule procedure to require organisations responsible for providing essential public services and critical infrastructure to draw up contingency plans in the event of their computer systems failing to deal with calendar dates after 31 December 1999; to require such plans and the names of those responsible for them to be notified to an appropriate authority; and to require the plans to be made available on demand. I shall seek the leave of the House to bring in the Computer Millennium Non-Compliance (Contingency Plans) Bill on Tuesday 2 February.

If enacted, my Bill would do much to ensure that the essential public services on which all of us rely, especially the most vulnerable, will be protected in less than a year from now; otherwise, we shall see develop over this year a growing mood of uncertainty and alarm, which will alter the behaviour of the public and of financial markets. We still have time to avoid that situation.

4.6 pm

Mr. Alan Campbell (Tynemouth): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate and pleased, too, that this year we are dealing with our own reports rather than with reports inherited from the previous Committee—although I suppose the Minister may not share my sense of familiarity with them. I associate myself with the comments made about the work of the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the Clerks and the National Audit Office. I add my warmest wishes to my hon. Friend the Minister in her new role. She brings with her a considerable reputation from the Department of Trade and Industry. I wish her well.

The Committee produced 67 reports over the year. The House will be relieved that I do not intend to comment on all of them. I shall limit my comments to three—the 48th report "Ministry of Defence: Sale of the Married Quarters Estate", the 61st "Getting Value for Money in Privatisations" and the 65th "Privatisation of the Railway Rolling Stock Leasing Companies". I wish to comment on those reports for two reasons. First, privatisation is an on-going issue. The Government have signalled their intention to sell shares in the Commonwealth Development Corporation, the National Air Traffic Services and Belfast port. We have also collected a national asset register that presupposes that in the fulness of time those assets will also be sold off.

Secondly, the 61st and 65th reports were published when the House was in recess. The 65th attracted some attention, such was the scale of public concern. The reports raise important issues for the House: they should be debated on the Floor of the House and our debates should be on the record of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) has already alluded to the 65th report. In July 1992, the then Department of Transport issued proposals for railway

[Mr. Alan Campbell]

privatisation. That was followed in 1993 by the Railways Bill, which provided the legislative background to privatisation. British Rail began to reorganise its operations for sale. The three rolling stock companies or roscos were to lease stock to the train operators. That was to be a long-term investment. It was assumed that the rolling stock would have a lifespan of about 30 years. I suspect that there are people travelling on trains who would regard 30-year-old stock as something of a luxury, but it would be a long-term investment. In 1996, the roscos were sold off for about £1.8 billion, but the important point is that, within a few months, they were sold on for £2.7 billion. In that process, the taxpayer lost out considerably and British Rail managers in post and former British Rail managers made personal fortunes. We have already heard that, for personal investments of between nothing at all in one case, and £120,000 in another, those managers received windfalls of between £15 million and £33 million. Perhaps to rub salt into the wounds, they admitted to the Committee that, when they sold the companies on, none of them paid capital gains tax.

The Committee found it significant that two of the three buyers of the roscos were management buy-outs. Employee buy-outs were envisaged in section 113 of the Railway Act 1993, but, with hindsight, I am quite sure that the employee buy-outs and the sell-offs were not the type of management buy-outs envisaged in the Act. I am very much in favour of employees owning their own companies, or certainly having shares in their companies, but that type of management buy-out does not fit my model, either.

It became clear that being a manager in British Rail at that time gave certain advantages. All the potential bidders who came before the Committee said that they had access to what they called the basic information—in one case, they said that they had had too much information—but much of that information was provided late, and the British Rail managers were in a much better position to deal with it and to realise its importance. There is an enormous difference between having information about a company and understanding how that company works—that is of fundamental importance for all privatisations where management buy-outs are involved. The British Rail managers had that understanding so, as the Committee pointed out, the playing field was not level.

Furthermore, one potential bidder, who came before the Committee and who later bought one of the roscos, said that, when he had contacted the sellers asking for an indicative price, he had been told £1 billion each. Even when the roscos were sold on, they did not attract £1 billion each. Mr. Souter was able to shrug his shoulders at that when he appeared before the Committee; he had lost out the first time, but presumably thought that he would gain the second time. I am sure that it is in the nature of Mr. Souter's work that he believes that what goes around comes around, and that his time will come. The question for the Committee and for the House is when the taxpayer's time will come in these deals.

The Department of Transport was aware of the loss-making potential of those deals and yet, as we have already heard, no clawback arrangement was made. The funding arrangements for the channel tunnel rail link contained a clawback provision over the next 15 years. It is not impossible to arrange such provisions, but the Committee was told that clawback was not seriously considered and it did not find its way into the final arrangements for the sale of the roscos. The Department was told to get on with it: it was told by Ministers to carry on regardless, and that the shortfall could be blamed on market conditions. It is clear that, by selling those companies in the way that they did, the Government helped to create the very market conditions about which they had been talking.

In April 1994, the plan was put to the Prime Minister and sanctioned at the highest level. Warnings were put in a memorandum; the Committee pointed out—and I point out again—that it wished that the accounting officers had put that information in a letter. The officers have a responsibility not only to their Departments and to Ministers but to the House, and it would have been nice if they had discharged that responsibility by putting their information and warnings in a letter.

We were told that political uncertainty had affected the sale, but most of the people who appeared before the Committee said that railways would have be on the Government's agenda whichever party won the election. They were told that investment could not come only from the taxpayer, which suggested that the companies would have to look to the private sector. As most of those who came before the Committee admitted, they realised that the new arrangement would carry Government subsidy and that if—almost unimaginably—it all went horribly wrong for the railways, the Government would have to step in.

Where was the uncertainty in that? The people who recognised that there might well be uncertainty but who could recognise the potential were, of course, the managers themselves, who went on to buy and sell on the roscos. Almost predictably, the Government went for a quick sale, the market got the depressed sale that it had anticipated and quick profits were made. Although I agreed with much that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) said about the role of civil servants, I want to point out that those sales were ministerially led; they were not led by departmental civil servants.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Was not the period that elapsed between the management buy-out and the time when the managers sold on the rolling stock companies as little as seven months? It is difficult to justify the assertion that market conditions were responsible for the conditions of the original sale, given that, only a few months later, the companies were sold on for such huge and unacceptably high profits.

Mr. Campbell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that comment. It is precisely the point that there appears to have been some miraculous change in market conditions, and I shall return to that matter in due course.

I should like to move on to the Committee's 48th report, dealing with the sale of the MOD married quarters estate. Although it is easy to see how rolling stock might deteriorate over time and fall in value, it is hard to understand how property prices for the married quarters estate could fall in value over a period of 25 years. The evidence to the Committee showed that the MOD's

preferred option in 1994 was some kind of housing trust. In summer 1994, new Ministers at the MOD again sanctioned the sell-off and again it was sanctioned by the highest authorities. Annington bought the houses, which, as we have already heard, are rented back to the MOD. Annington paid £1,662 million; that is a considerable amount, but, on the MOD's estimate, it is still £140 million less than it would have cost the MOD to run the houses for the next 25 years, and at the end of that time the MOD would, presumably, still have owned the properties.

The Committee was told, in most of sessions at which privatisation was discussed, that privatisation is about the transfer of risk. It is hard to see where the real risk lies for Annington in that deal, but I know where the risk lies for the taxpayer. The MOD spends about £350 million a year in rent, whether or not the houses are occupied, and in December 1997 some 13,600 MOD homes were unoccupied, at a cost to the taxpayer of more than £60 each a week in rent. The MOD spends at least £1,500—probably considerably more—on each house every year on maintenance costs, and it admitted that it still pays £11 million a year to keep families in private accommodation. If we add up the costs of the sale and of the outgoings over the next 25 years, we see that the taxpayer, or the then Government, received £1.6 billion for the deal, but that the actual cost to the taxpayer would be £3 billion over that period. To rub more salt into the wounds, Annington did not ask to pay the money in two tranches, but was asked to do so. Again, the taxpayer lost out. I understand that one anonymous employee of Annington described the matter as a "licence to print money". However, yet again there was a huge sale for which Ministers created the market conditions.

I have a number of concerns about that and other privatisation matters and welcome the 61st report, on best value for privatisation. I hope that the Government learn lessons from it, for in the past it seems that despite all the warnings, minutes and guidelines that existed, if Ministers wanted to push decisions through, they did so.

I was interested to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), who unfortunately has left the Chamber. He spoke about examining public expenditure or privatisations before they actually happened. I shall return to that theme later.

As has already been pointed out, it is not for the Committee to be for or against the policy of privatisation: to some extent, we are all privatisers. However, the Committee has a role to play when the implementation of that policy fails to give value for money to the taxpayer. The more privatisations we looked at, the more some of us became convinced that there had been a headlong rush towards sell-offs under the previous Government, either to fill the coffers or to spread the perceived benefits of privatisation. That is for others to judge. However, that policy produced what my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) memorably called a "scorched earth" policy—or perhaps a "final solution" would be a better term.

It is not as though there are no watchdogs in this area. However, if I owned a watchdog—perhaps I should say that I do in case there are any burglars in my neighbourhood—I would not be very happy if it did not bark until the deed was done. It is no good the dog's barking after the burglar has been in and run off with the family silver. I wonder whether there should be earlier scrutiny. I appreciate that it would be difficult to identify who should carry it out: issues of commercial confidentiality would presumably preclude the House from assuming that role. The National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee already have a scrutiny role, but that comes into play after the event, and it would muddy the waters if they provided advice on the process beforehand.

Would it make that much difference if the decision to proceed were made almost come what may? By the time the Public Accounts Committee considers the matter, the Minister concerned has often left office or moved on, as has the accounting officer. I think that the charges pending against accounting officers should be considered before they move on so that the Public Accounts Committee could become involved earlier in the process.

This debate is not about closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. These reports are made more difficult to swallow because we were told for a long time that the horse was a nag that was not fit to enter the 2.30 race at Hexham. However, we often discovered within a few weeks of the sale that the horse had turned into a grand national winner. The jockey who rode off with the horse not only received no share of the winnings but did not achieve the asking price. Yet we see the occasional glimpse of a jockey opposite.

The taxpayers deserve better. Governments are very good at collecting and spending taxes: they should be better at safeguarding taxpayers' interests. We hear a lot about tax at election time, usually from aging rock stars and game show hosts who threaten to leave the country if taxation is increased—although unfortunately they seldom do so. They are probably in a position to look after themselves. I am concerned about the small business people, the teachers, nurses, pensioners and the girls on the check-outs at Morrisons who do not have to earn very much before they start paying tax. Their parents and grandparents paid tax that was used to buy and sustain public companies, and they deserve better from their investment.

I hope that the Government recognise those concerns, because the issues remain current. The Public Accounts Committee will continue to hold current Ministers and accounting officers responsible for their decisions.

4.23 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I wish to refer to the 42nd report of the Public Accounts Committee, which deals with the Skye bridge. I shall be relatively brief, as many of the issues were covered by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy).

The Skye bridge was the first private finance initiative project—the former Tory policy has apparently now become new Labour orthodoxy and been re-branded public-private partnership. The handling of the project was a disaster which the Committee rightly criticises. A few quotes from the report will illustrate that fact. The report states:

"This was a serious omission in their evaluation of the project which leaves a question mark over its value for money . . . Toll payers' interests were insufficiently protected . . . We are not satisfied that the costs of the bridge are reasonable . . . This was contrary to good practice, unfair and imprudent . . . It is highly unsatisfactory . . . A question mark must remain over the extent of value for money obtained."

[Mr. Alasdair Morgan]

The project was a disaster which, thankfully, the Government responsible paid for, together with their other mistakes. One might argue that at least we got a bridge at the end of it. The Public Accounts Committee recognises that fact in its first conclusion, which states:

"The Department achieved their primary objective, the provision of a privately financed tolled crossing to Skye."

In its eagerness to find a statement that was not critical of it, the Scottish Office responded to the Public Accounts Committee by saying:

"The Scottish Office Development Department is pleased that the Committee recognises that the bridge brings benefits."

It is hardly likely to have done anything else, given that Skye was previously an island unconnected to the mainland. Any bridge built by anyone would presumably have brought some benefits to the people of Skye. However, the anger in Skye and in Scotland remains.

The Labour party in opposition peddled the story in the highlands and islands that it would abolish tolls when it came to power. However, there has been only a reduction in tolls—to which the Committee refers in paragraph 17 of its report—for frequent users of the Skye bridge. If one is prepared to shell out £26, one can get one's tickets at a discount.

Many car owners on Skye, in my constituency and throughout rural Scotland would not own a car if they lived in an urban area. They cannot afford to run their cars: they do so because it is a necessity, as sufficient public transport does not exist. A disproportionate part of their family budgets is devoted to running a car. The annual MOT test can cause a family budget crisis if the car fails to pass. It is claimed that £26 is somehow a concession for those people, but I think that the charge is most unfair as it bears so heavily on those who can least afford to pay. The Government must do more work in order to bring the benefits of a really low toll to the people of Skye and the highlands and islands. Why should the people of Skye and the highlands pay for a defective scheme and for the mistakes of the previous Administration?

In 1997, this Government were prepared to write off £62 million in debt on the bridge across the Humber and to reduce interest payments on the remaining debt. Will the Government explain why the people of Skye are somehow less deserving of having their debt written off? After all, the fee for a return crossing on the Humber bridge is £2.60 and it is £11.20 on the Skye bridge.

Mr. Charles Kennedy: I have already had my shout, so I am loth to intervene. However, I must raise a point about the Government's concessionary package—which was much less than Labour implied at the time of the election. I know from my own experience that those in the poorest categories, particularly the elderly, might make the crossing only two or three times a year, mostly to travel to Inverness for hospital visits. Forcing such people to purchase a book of 20 tickets for £26 adds to the disadvantage and discrimination that they already suffer.

Mr. Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that valid point. Added to the cost of the crossing is the substantial cost of petrol in rural areas, which has not been helped by some of the Government's policies. It is a mistake to think that people travel regularly from Skye to Inverness. The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that some people must wait two or three years before they realise any benefit from their £26 investment.

The Government have said that there is no funding available to buy out the concession contract. In light of the Committee's report, do the Government consider that a variation of the windfall tax might be appropriate in the case of the excess profits that are clearly being made by the concessionaire? Would it be appropriate to use such a tax to buy out the contract? The Bank of America now owns 97 per cent. of the bridge and is presumably clawing back 97 per cent. of the profits from its concession. It is currently being sued in the United States to the tune of £1 billion by the city of San Francisco and some 250 other local authorities in that country. There could be no more apt a target for a windfall tax.

The report also says that there is no guarantee that the toll will be removed even once the debt is repaid and the concession ends. Will the Government now give a guarantee in that respect? The Scottish Office's response to the part of the Committee's report that broached that subject was fairly opaque and was included in a series of responses that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West described as casual.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned that Professor Robert Black of Edinburgh university said last week that the fact that the assignation statement identifying the authorised concessionaire had not been published along with the toll order was a fatal flaw. The legal basis for collecting tolls now seems to be on shaky ground. Surely the legitimacy of the whole operation urgently needs investigating, as the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West has already suggested. Once the result of the current action before the Court of Session in Edinburgh is known, that investigation must be set up as a matter of urgency.

We need a thorough inquiry into the complex web of financing and contractual obligations. The inquiry must be conducted in a transparent manner because throughout the saga we have lacked any such transparency. As every year goes by, the public and hon. Members become more and more confused about the matter.

I turn finally to another matter that has been mentioned in the debate. The Chairman of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), referred to the nature of scrutiny arrangements under the new Scottish Parliament. I believe that the system will increase the scrutiny of public expenditure in Scotland. No United Kingdom committee, even one with the appetite for work that the Public Accounts Committee seems to have, could hope to give the amount of scrutiny to Scottish expenditure that it will receive from a committee of new Members of the Scottish Parliament, who presumably will be eager to call to account the civil servants in St. Andrew's house. That has too seldom happened in the past.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) followed the same line, but his suggestion that the Public Accounts Committee should continue to investigate activities in the devolved departments in Scotland is a recipe for chaos and conflict and would be

deeply resented in Scotland. My party wants the new Scottish Parliament to work effectively, but it will not be assisted in that if Committees in this House interfere.

Mr. Page: I made that suggestion only in regard to the extra moneys that will be paid by the English taxpayer to the Scottish taxpayer.

Mr. Morgan: I do not think, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you would allow me to rehearse the argument that Scotland is not subsidised by the UK taxpayer and that, if anything, the cash flows in the other direction. I would be willing to have an argument about all kinds of expenditure against all kinds of income which I think we would win, as we have done in the past, but I shall move on.

Later in his speech, the Chairman of the Committee referred again to the need for parts of the United Kingdom to learn from the experience of other parts. He cited the Committee's report on cataract surgery in Scotland. After devolution, any report produced by the Scottish Parliament would be just as readily available to Departments elsewhere in the United Kingdom as a report by the House on Scotland currently is. What matters is the willingness of Departments and agencies throughout the United Kingdom to learn from the experience of others in the UK and, for that matter, in Europe.

4.34 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I, too, thank all those at the National Audit Office, Sir John Bourn, the Committee Chairman and, in particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), whose experience was helpful to all members of the Committee.

I also congratulate the new Financial Secretary on her appointment; I am sure that she will bring a wealth of experience to her new role. Last night, I hosted a forum of 50 businesses in the House, which was attended by her successor, by Lord Clinton-Davis, and by the Minister for Energy and Industry, who all sang her praises. She will bring a businesslike approach to her new role.

It is a great privilege to be a member of the Public Accounts Committee because it is the premier Select Committee. Other Select Committees receive minuscule support in terms of the numbers of staff they have compared with the National Audit Office. That is right, because there is £5,000 of Government expenditure for every man, woman and child in the country. It is of key importance that Governments deliver value for money. The new Government, with their focus on outputs and value and the public service agreements that have been referred to, are in favour of that approach. It is important that we are pushing in the same direction.

My background is in multinational companies, where I managed product development, marketing and advertising for Europe and Britain before starting my own businesses. I was also leader of Croydon council, the largest council in London. I came to the Committee with those perspectives. I was surprised that Departments did not adopt proper accounting techniques and, in particular, that they had no apparent idea of cashflow or asset management. That is now being changed through the introduction of resource accounting, which is welcome. Through more rational asset management in individual Departments, we shall be able to make great savings and create opportunities for the taxpayer.

Local government is often regarded as the poor relation of central Departments, but councils already perform asset and capital management and use performance indicators, which are now being included in public service agreements. Previous speakers have mentioned parliamentary accountability for that expenditure. Councils are audited by the Audit Commission, but there is not a Select Committee considering their expenditure. Perhaps the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee should do that, as the Chairman of that Committee has suggested. Other hon. Members have mentioned the lack of accountability of the Housing Corporation, housing associations and quangos and the need for more rigour in European expenditure to bring greater confidence as we move towards a new Europe.

Hon. Members have referred to the accountability of those who are meant to be responsible for expenditure—the so-called permanent secretaries, who are in fact semi-permanent because, as career civil servants, they move on from a post as soon as the Public Accounts Committee catches up with them. We need to consider a system of accountability for those individuals. A problem in many of the Departments that we have studied is that many civil servants have not had sufficient financial training. Departments do not have enough accountants and financial or commercial experts to focus on value for money and outputs. There are great people in the civil service, but we need to strike a commercial balance.

The Government are considering more partnerships with the private sector under the private finance initiative, which the Committee has examined. It is crucial that when the public sector engages with the private sector, the former is enabled to get the best deal through commercial negotiation. I look forward to a new era of secondment and switched experiences in which we can ensure that we get the best value for the taxpayer.

Several hon. Members have referred to privatisation, and I shall not dwell on the points that were made so well by my hon. Friends the Members for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) and for Shipley (Mr. Leslie). The issues considered by the Committee are not political; they relate to management and to getting the best deal for the public, but there is a grey area about when timing becomes policy.

As has been said, different people have different views on privatisation, but let us assume for a moment that we agree with a given privatisation. If that is so, we have to accept that timing is important in respect of value for money. If rolling stock suddenly has to be sold before a general election, as was the case, what happens to value for money for the taxpayer? There is a false sale, which means a lower price. The rolling stock cannot be sold in stages so the market cannot be tested, and, even more crucial, the people who thought that there might be a Labour Government—wise people knew that there would be—wonder what the commercial value of the privatised rolling stock of a formerly nationalised railway would be under a Labour Government.

Some people might think that a Labour Government would not want to encourage that, but because the previous Government were hastily pushing civil servants into the premature sell-off of railway stock, what happened, among other things, was that the price was deflated but later took off in a real market and was then exaggerated by the political changes. In the interests of the Government and the taxpayer, the sale should have

[Mr. Geraint Davies]

been delayed for the sake of value for money, instead of being pushed forward for ideological reasons. There is a similar story with the Ministry of Defence property, a scandal that has already been mentioned.

Public service agreements are measurable performance targets that the new Government have introduced and I shall focus on how they fit in with the activities of the NAO and the PAC. The old way of allocating Government expenditure was on a yearly basis. Every year, each Department would tell the Treasury that it wanted a certain amount of money because it had it last year and that it must have it again or there would be problems.

The new way—the third way, as it were—is for expenditure to be output-based. New money is allocated on the basis of what is to be done with it, whether what is to be done is measurable and what it will mean for the public. This involves a three-year planning phase—the comprehensive spending review—and alongside it we are to have resource accounting. It all adds up to a much more professional, strategic approach to the management of public funds.

Obviously, we have all heard about the extra £40 billion that will be spent on health and education, but the watchphrase is "investment for reform". That is what the public service agreements are about: 350 performance targets and 150 efficiency targets. We shall be able to see things coming which the PAC needs to review—for example, truancy needs to be down by one third in three years, car crime needs to be down by 30 per cent. in five years, and there needs to be 3 per cent. efficiency savings a year in the national health service.

Let us not pretend that there will not be debates over the priorities, whether there should be local variations and whether there needs to be a shift in priorities over time. However, the key point is to make it clear that we look for a return on investment in terms of the outputs that the public enjoy.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) mentioned in passing independent verification and scrutiny. I am sure that they will be instituted. My understanding of the current position is that they will be overseen by a Cabinet Committee, but clearly the NAO and the PAC are also well placed. The public service agreements will be linked to performance information, which will be part of the resource accounting regime. It is the view of the NAO, the PAC, the Treasury Select Committee and the Procedure Committee that the performance information in resource accounting should be independently validated, preferably by the NAO and the PAC. I hope that the Government will consider that.

Efficiency statements were announced at the same time as the public service agreements by the former Chief Secretary. I mention them especially in relation to fraud, procurement and absenteeism, which were the former Chief Secretary's focus in this instance, and to the work that the PAC has undertaken in the past year or so.

As has been said, the Committee recognised that there was some £900 million of housing benefit fraud, something like 8 per cent. of total spending. It concluded in its report not only that the Government needed to be fair and to ensure that the people who deserved housing benefit and were entitled to it in fact received it, but that they had a robust system to deter fraud.

Benefit interaction and confusion provided the opportunity for benefit fraud. In particular, the Department of Social Security and the Benefits Agency failed to control claims for income support and jobseeker's allowance—people applied for housing benefit at the same time, and the resulting gateway led to enormous benefit fraud. The problem is being tackled, and we should pay tribute to the work of the NAO and our Committee in bringing the problem to the fore. The Government welcomed what the Committee said.

The Government spend something like £20 billion on procurement. That is big money, and it is important that if we can make savings on Government purchases, we do so. In our report on the Ministry of Defence's stores management, we identified that for every £1 million of expenditure, between £30,000 and £100,000 could be saved or, to look at it another way, was lost because stores were not issued directly to the people using them. Again, that is being taken on.

As for NHS supplies, we examined the need for systematic analysis of price differences—the price of items being supplied other than to the NHS—in a bid to drive down supplier costs. Indeed, we are interested in the development of various new procurement techniques, be they linked to the PFI, or be they procurement cards, the streamlined purchase of something like 1,750,000 low-value goods or electronic procurement.

As hon. Members will know, the target is that something like 90 per cent. of routine items should be electronically procured by March 2001, and a model is being devised for procurement excellence. There are also Ministry of Defence smart procurement initiatives and a joint departmental strategy. All these issues are key to the Government's value-for-money strategy and were examined by the NAO and the PAC.

Sickness absence is a problem that the Government need to tackle. The Committee did some work on the Metropolitan police service whose sickness average is 14.4 days a year. One day costs £6.3 million, and the implementation of some of our recommendations has already led to various savings.

We also did some work on the Child Support Agency. It is clear from what has been said that there are various problems. The basic message is that we need a simpler, standardised system, and that message has clearly been taken on board in the Government's recommendations.

In conclusion, the NAO and the PAC have been and will continue to be an enormous stimulus to Government success. The advent of public service agreements will bring a new stimulus in terms of value for money for the taxpayer. Alongside a revolution in information technology and a new accountability, we can look forward to ever higher standards of quality services for the public, tailored to the priorities of the people of Britain.

4.48 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I congratulate the hon. Lady the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) on her appointment as Financial Secretary. With the introduction of the euro, she takes over the job at a challenging time. I wish her well in that task, because it will be vital for all of us that she gets it right. Like other members of the Public Accounts Committee, I pay tribute to the Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir John Bourn, for the excellent job that he does

in charge of the National Audit Office. As a member of the Public Accounts Commission, which sets the budget for the NAO, he is in charge of a lean and efficient organisation. He scrutinises every area of public expenditure extremely well.

I should also like to pay tribute to the Committee Clerk, Ken Brown, and his staff, who order our affairs with meticulous efficiency and distribute the paper work on time and in the correct order. Many hon. Members—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, I forgot to pay tribute to my Chairman for his outstanding efficiency and courtesy. I would have been struck off the Committee if I had not done so. Please, Mr. Chairman, call me early and allow me to speak at great length at the next Committee sitting.

Many hon. Members have referred to the Committee's effectiveness. The ideal would be for the Committee to have no work to do, because that would mean that there was no misappropriation of taxpayers' money. The Government would set their departmental spending priorities and each Department would draw up its budget and present the relevant motion to Parliament, which would approve it or not. Supplementary and excess votes would become an extreme rarity, and retrospective Treasury approval would be non-existent.

Perhaps there is some light at the end of the tunnel. We may be able to achieve something resembling that nirvana by the introduction of resource accounting, which will be introduced in 1999-2000, and will replace the current system of appropriation accounts. Perhaps I am being over-optimistic, but I believe that its introduction is the largest change in the delivery of our public services since the Committee was established more than a century and a half ago, so we should have high expectations of it.

Will the Financial Secretary give the House an idea of when the present system of appropriation accounts will be phased out? I note that the Treasury has not asked the PAC for approval to phase it out, so no date has been set. Will she tell the House what trigger points will have to be reached in the resource accounting process before it will be safe to phase out the existing system, which has been in place for so long?

I hope that the resource accounting system will enable Parliament to obtain financial transparency from and exercise far greater control over every Department of State. Other right hon. and hon. Members have referred to the Ministry of Defence—our 23rd report in 1996-97 shows that it overspent on class I votes 1, 2 and 3 by a staggering £234 million. When the Treasury was questioned by the Committee, I asked for a note on this matter. The MOD was fined £168 million, which came out of its budget for the subsequent year. The Secretary of State for Defence prepared a report, which went to the Chief Secretary. It is a very serious matter when a Department overspends its parliamentary voted money.

Permanent secretaries, who, as accounting officers, are involved in such excesses deserve to have their promotion prospects carefully examined. They should realise that their duty as accounting officers is paramount. The right hon. Baroness Thatcher, when she was Prime Minister in charge of the civil service, instructed her Cabinet Secretary to examine the effectiveness of permanent secretaries before they were promoted. We should return to that practice.

The 23rd report criticised the financial controls at the MOD. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) said, the costs on the Waltham Abbey Royal Gunpowder Mills project escalated out of control by more than £10 million and retrospective Treasury approval was sought. That is an extremely rare occurrence—it has happened only three times since 1992. Some sanction should have been applied against the responsible MOD officials.

Worst of all, that report highlighted the fact that between 1988 and 1996, a staggering £50 billion was passed through uncontrolled suspense accounts. There were 2,705 suspense accounts, and £40 million had to be written off in 95 of them, including £19.5 million through the Army pay disbursement suspense account. The operation of such financial controls in a major Department of State are a disaster, and the accounting officers should be accountable for such gigantic errors.

I wonder whether the Financial Secretary can tell us whether the resource accounting shadow programme is on track. The programmes were supposed to be completed by 31 December 1998 so that a full shadow financial resource account could be produced by the end of the financial year on 1 April 1999. If the implementation of that process has slipped, for example in the Department of Social Security or the Ministry of Defence, which are the most likely candidates, it will be difficult to produce that first shadow resource account. I should be grateful if the Minister would give us some idea about that.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the fact that devolution will change the role of the PAC. That may be a good thing, but I am concerned that there should be no underlap or overlap between the current PAC functions and the functions that will be carried out in the future by the regional audit offices. We must watch that carefully. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the PAC, would be only too pleased, if asked, to give help and advice about how the procedures could be carried out in those auditing bodies.

As has already been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members, we have carried out some important regional surveys. For example, our 44th report points out the difficulties with the payment of disability allowance in Northern Ireland where as much as £17.8 million out of a total of £250 million, was incorrectly paid out in benefit. Such scams must be brought to the attention of the House and it is important that the Northern Ireland Grand Committee is properly able to examine such matters.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the 32nd report which says that 17 per cent. of NHS bodies in Scotland are not confident that they will be millennium compliant by 31 May 1999. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) spoke at length on millennium compliance. A total of £56 million will be required to put that problem right. I hope that I am not unlucky enough to be on a life support machine in a Scottish hospital on 31 December this year or, if I am, I hope that it will continue to function.

The 32nd report also deals with cataract surgery, which is a quality-of-life issue. If a cataract operation is not carried out in a timely manner it is possible to go blind. Our report found that of the completion target of 80 per cent. for day cases, only 43 per cent. was achieved. That is a staggering shortfall that should have been rectified much earlier. As a result, the NHS was unable to benefit from various savings of £1.5 million.

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

Although the bulk of the PAC's work is about ensuring value for money, rooting out fraud is just as important. After examining some of the latest figures today, I have a robust figure for fraud in the Department of Social Security of at least £4 billion. That is a staggering figure. Time after time in Treasury debates in the House the Government chide the Opposition and ask them to say where savings can be made when we say that their budget is unsustainable. The Financial Secretary should look at that figure of £4 billion in fraud. I shall break it down for her so that there is no doubt that it is robust.

In the Benefits Agency, the figure for fraud is reckoned to be about £2.3 billion. In housing benefit, the figure for fraud is reckoned to be £900 million although, in our later report this year, that may be coming down, and I welcome that. Gross errors in income support—that is overpayments less underpayments—account for £424 million and those relating to the jobseeker's allowance account for £167 million. That makes a total of almost £4 billion.

There are some fairly elementary things that could be done quite quickly to reduce that figure. For example, it is estimated that the loss to the national insurance fund account arising from the fraudulent encashment of giro cheques and other order books may be as high as £64 million and is certainly confirmed at £13.2 million. It would be a fairly simple process to have a system of bar codes so that we could be certain that the person cashing the giro cheque is the person entitled to do so.

I pay tribute to the National Audit Office, which last week, for the 12th year running, has qualified the Benefit Agency's accounts, and, for the 10th year running, has qualified the national insurance fund's accounts. It is a very serious matter when accounts have been qualified for such a long time. If I were one of the accounting officers at the Department of Social Security, I would be pretty ashamed of that record.

Hon. Members have already mentioned the NIRS2 computer system, which was dealt with also in the Committee's 46th report, which was produced on 1 July 1998. The NIRS2 is one of the Government's largest computer systems and should be supporting the Contributions Agency in its endeavours to make payments to pensioners. However, even today, six years after the tender was let, the agency is still having to pay out compensation to those who did not receive proper payments into their pension funds. That is an utter disgrace. The Department of Social Security should have got on top of the matter far more quickly than it did. In February, the matter will be brought before the Committee. I hope that, in line with the request of my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page), we ask for Andersen Consulting to send a senior, answerable partner to tell us why the system has been so delayed.

We should very seriously examine fraud in the Department of Social Security. Time after time—probably four times since 1990—the problem has come before the Committee. We must devise mechanisms to ensure that real and positive action is taken when such matters are dealt with by the Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden has already mentioned the National Audit Office's other remits. When the Public Accounts Commission set the National Audit Office's budget, the Comptroller and Auditor General made it quite clear to us that he was completely dissatisfied with the fact that the European Court of Auditors, based in Brussels, has greater access to non-departmental government bodies and executive agencies than our own National Audit Office. The Government should rectify that anomaly forthwith.

The standard of our NAO is considerably higher than that of the European Court of Auditors. In our 35th report, which hon. Members have already mentioned, we state that fraud in the Community is a serious matter. I am not surprised that, today, the matter has been subject to a vote in the European Parliament. Paragraph 5 of our 35th report states:

"We are disappointed to find that standards of financial management and accounting across the Community are still too low; and that there is evidence of waste, error and fraud in the Community's expenditure programmes."

It continues:

"we endorse the Comptroller and Auditor General's conclusion that the Commission have some way to go before they attain the quality of financial reporting expected of public sector financial statements, such as government accounts in the United Kingdom".

When our NAO has been so damning about the European Court of Auditors, the latter should consider how the former conducts its work and try to adopt some best practice.

As I am dealing with our 35th report, it is worth highlighting the four major areas in which the European Community is falling short—the very subject of today's vote in the European Parliament. First, the report states that agricultural compensation schemes do not take into account movements in world prices. It is fairly elementary that they should do so. The second problem is the media's oft-quoted example of high tobacco subsidies that have absolutely no effect on improving tobacco quality. The third problem is that the recovery of customs duties are not always collected properly. The final matter, and perhaps financially most important, is the high error level in the payment of structural funds. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden has said that total errors amount to £3.5 billion per year. As we are the third largest net contributor, at £1.7 billion, the issue directly affects Parliament and the taxpayers of this country.

We should be very concerned about such matters in Europe. Will the Financial Secretary tell us what action the Government took to rectify the problems when they held the presidency last year? What follow-up has there been? If we are to renegotiate our financial arrangements with the European Commission and our Fontainebleau rebate is to be reduced, the continuing financial irregularities will be of even greater concern to us.

The work of the NAO is of the highest quality, ensuring savings of more than seven times its running costs. It performs a great service to the House and the nation in monitoring the financial probity of the uses to which taxpayers' money is put, but it has less access to UK institutions than the Brussels-based European Court of Auditors. That is an anomaly. I hope that the Financial Secretary will say something about it. If not, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission will pursue the matter vigorously with the Chancellor until we have a solution.

It is a privilege to be a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which does an effective job in monitoring the NAO's work. I commend its work to the House.

5.6pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Mr. Deputy Speaker, imagine that you are a shareholder in a large national corporation. You do not normally pay close attention to the company's dealings, but you read the annual report, which has just arrived on your doorstep. As you read it over your morning orange juice, you find that the company has divested itself of an arm of what it calls its non-core business. At first you nod with approval as you read that the sale realised £12 million for the corporation, but as you turn to the appendix you become puzzled. You discover that for the division of the company to be sold, it had to be restructured. That restructuring cost £2.2 million. You check the appendix once more to find that the sale also had costs amounting to £3.1 million. The sale price of £12 million has cost £5.3 million to realise, so the real price that the company received was only £6.7 million—or was it?

You look at the fixed assets in the accounts to find that assets valued at £5 million were transferred with the sale. The price that your company has received seems to have diminished to £1.7 million from that original £12 million—at least it would have been £1.7 million but for the guarantees. Your company gave 63 guarantees to the purchaser regarding levels of work and income. Because the work in one or two areas was less than forecast—although overall work was considerably greater—your company had to pay compensation to the purchaser totalling £1.542 million.

Your mental arithmetic is in overdrive as you calculate that the original purchase price of £12 million now looks more like just £158,000. Well, it would look like that if the final sale price had been £12 million. In fact, because of a post-sale adjustment in the value of the transferred assets, a further £600,000 was clawed back off the original sale price by the purchaser. Your company appears to have paid—not been paid—£442,000 to divest itself of that part of its business.

Perhaps you console yourself with the thought that it must have been a loss-making part of the company—a non-profitable division that the company is better off without. If that were the case, it is hard to see why, because your company has guaranteed it an income of £111 million over the next six years. Few businesses get a better start-up. On reading that annual report, would you not determine to get rid of your shares in that dreadfully managed company as quickly as possible?

I regret to inform you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this is not some fanciful thought experiment. You were a shareholder in that company and so were the rest of the British public. The company was Great Britain plc under the previous Government and the sale was that of the facilities services division of the Atomic Energy Authority in March 1995.

I am delighted to say that the shareholders expressed their view of the board's incompetence at a quinquennial meeting held on 1 May 1997 and the company is under new—perhaps I should say new Labour—management.

The Public Accounts Committee has done Parliament a great service by its thorough investigation into Atomic Energy Authority privatisations, first of its facilities services division and subsequently in September 1996 of AEA Technology. In the sale of AEA Technology, the Department of Trade and Industry received a gross sum of £227.75 million following a flotation valuing the shares at £2.80 each. After deducting the costs of restructuring at £121 million and the £8.1 million paid to the Government's so-called advisers, the sale achieved a net figure to the Treasury of just £98.65 million. How strange then that on the very day of the sale, the markets placed a £34.8 million premium on the offer price. Within 20 months, the share price had almost tripled, valuing the company at more than £622 million. The taxpayer had netted just £98 million.

When the Public Accounts Committee asked the DTI to explain why AEA Technology so spectacularly outperformed the FT support services index in the month after the sale, the response was that although it no longer had responsibility for the company post-privatisation, the Department believed that the new management had been

"assiduous in talking to their shareholders and explaining to them their plans as they gradually began to develop."

So it was a matter of spin. If assiduous talking can push a company's performance 30 per cent. higher than the FT index for the sector, Charlie Whelan should leave the BBC and come on down to the City because there will always be a job for him there.

It is vital that the mistakes of the past are not reproduced in future privatisations. The PAC reports are littered with references to previous advice which has been ignored, with Departments blindly trying to reinvent the wheel and protecting their own dignity rather than requesting advice from other Departments that have broader experience and have learned from past mistakes. If there were ever a case for collegiality and joined-up government, it is here, in the custodianship and disposal of public assets.

I shall briefly set out the lessons that I hope will never have to be relearned about the process of privatisation and how the Government can maximise returns and ensure value for money for the British taxpayer.

The beginning of the privatisation process is marked by pre-sale restructuring. It is unacceptable for Departments to seek to inflate net sale proceeds by ignoring restructuring costs related to that sale. If restructuring is carried out, it should not bring benefits to the private purchaser without realising commensurate returns for the public.

I have mentioned the £121 million restructuring of AEA Technology. It can be argued that without such a restructuring, the business would have been unsaleable. However, I believe—this is not a recommendation in the 61st report—that after any restructuring, the Government should also consider afresh whether more value may now be achieved by retaining the asset post-restructure, rather than by selling it. Pre-sale restructuring should take place if it will enhance proceeds for the taxpayer. However, on no account should the Government seek to inflate proceeds to the Department by ignoring the restructuring costs when calculating net returns—as has been done in the past.

I wish to refer to the objectives of the sale. Departments should ensure that such objectives are carefully set prior to the privatisation process. In the sale of Scottish Power and Scottish Hydro-Electric, no benchmark or target ranges were identified either as to the number of

[Mr. Barry Gardiner]

shareholders or, indeed, the length of time that those shares were to be held by those shareholders. Yet only by quantifying those in advance would it have been possible to have analysed whether the much-vaunted objective of increasing individual share ownership had been achieved.

On benchmarking, the process of considering how a business is valued gives the Government some grasp of the potential worth of the enterprise and can act as a guide to whether the terms of the sale are likely to achieve full value for the taxpayer. In August 1988, the Rover group was sold to British Aerospace. Before entering into negotiations, the Government had not undertaken a comprehensive valuation of the company. Benchmarking is an essential tool of privatisation. Only a fool—or, perhaps, a Conservative Minister—attempts to sell something without having any idea of its value.

Book-building can be a useful tool in acquiring that knowledge, where brokers seek indications of demand at a range of prices to see where that demand begins to fall away. In book-building, it is vital that the range is not focused too narrowly, lest a similar result to that of AEA Technology occurs—where the sale price of £2.80 was the top of the range which was canvassed in the book-building process, and no significant tapering occurred during that process. That led to the gross undervaluing of the company and the corresponding loss to the taxpayer.

Departments should always consider retaining a proportion of the shares because that enables the Government to extract the maximum value for the taxpayer from post-sale enhancements in value. It is noted by the PAC in the 61st report that in the privatisation of the 12 regional electricity companies, not only were no benchmarks used, but, because no shares were retained, the public did not benefit by the rapid escalation of the share price which occurred shortly after the sale. By contrast, the successful phasing of the sale of British Aerospace, Associated British Ports, National Power and PowerGen enabled the taxpayer to benefit from additional proceeds of £2.3 billion. That shows how critical phasing can be.

The timing of privatisations is also critical. Privatisations which are offered too close to each other—like Railtrack and British Energy—can lead investors to regard the two as just one investment opportunity, thereby reducing the revenue gained.

On the role of external auditors and their appointment, it is vital that the appointment of advisers should be transparent and by competitive tender. The financial and legal advisers for the award of the first three passenger rail franchises were appointed by the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising without competition. Their fees accounted for nearly £19 million.

Competition not only lowers cost; it ensures propriety in the appointment process. When completion and success fees are agreed with advisers, it is ridiculous to rely on valuations made by the potential beneficiary of the success fee. Independent valuations must be obtained, and the performance criteria should be defined at the start of the process as far as possible.

Schroders' £1.99 million success fee for the sale of AEA Technology was based on its own valuation of AEA, which was not independently validated. The success fee paid to N. M. Rothschild and Son Ltd. was not formally agreed until two of the stages used as the basis for determining success had already been completed. That is not just to set one's own target and fix one's own reward; it is to place one's arrows in the bull's-eye before the game has even begun. Any criteria for success fees must be set out, preferably before the appointment of advisers, and based on independent reference points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) mentioned clawback. After the sale of the rolling stock leasing companies, all were resold within two years, with the profits that my hon. Friend mentioned. The Government, however, were aware that the timing of the sale might not be conducive to the achievement of best value for the taxpayer. A clawback provision relating to gains from further on-sales would have protected the taxpayer's interest, but no such provision was introduced. That should have happened. If a clawback provision had been inserted in the sale agreement for the 12 regional electricity companies, the public would have received their rightful share of the £214 million of excess pre-tax profits beyond the forecast profits used in agreeing the sale. In future sales, clawback should always be considered.

The United Kingdom has built up an enormous pool of experience relating to privatisation. There are many things that the Treasury has pioneered, and has got right. The use of partly paid offer structures is an excellent example. Investors have proved ready to pay a premium for partly paid shares, with minimal problems from non-payment of the second instalment. Sadly, much of Britain's experience has come in a bitter form, through the failures and mistakes so assiduously documented by the Public Accounts Committee. I pay tribute to the work that the Committee has done.

I join others in welcoming my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to her post. I also welcome the recent interchange between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Treasury. I believe that it will enhance the willingness of the two Departments to work constructively together. The mistakes of the past must not be repeated: that is the message that the House must send to Government, throughout Whitehall, on the basis of the PAC reports.

5.24 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I wish to concentrate on the 46th report, on the replacement of the national insurance recording system, something that, as the report clearly demonstrates, has been a comprehensive shambles.

The report, published on 10 June last year, refers to a system, the original contract for which was to cost about £134 million. We are not talking peanuts; we are talking about big sums, even in Government terms, and the fact that a large part of that money has been comprehensively wasted because the programme has been so late is a serious matter that we should all consider. As the Chairman of the Committee made clear, when the report came out, it seemed that there had been many problems, but, as far as the report showed, most of those, apparently, were resolved and the programme was due to come into operation. On July 13, it became clear via newspaper reports that the whole system had, apparently, gone live.

It was not until about the middle of September that it began to be clear that, far from the problems being all over and done with, there were still serious problems with

the new system, that it could not yet make the calculations—all the records were not there and ready to be used for calculations of new benefit claims—and that, in effect, all contributions-based benefit claims, plus linked housing benefit and council tax benefit claims, were being paid blind. It was not until 4 November, when we had the written answer to a written question to the Secretary of State for Social Security that I tabled and that was referred to by the Chairman, that it became clear how many problems there still were with the system.

The Chairman was, rightly, a bit angry that the Government had not come clean earlier and admitted that there were still many problems with the system. I accept that he is right to be angry, but I was a bit surprised that the Government did not come clean earlier as the major share of the blame for the failure of NIRS2 has to lie, not with the current Government, but with the previous Government, who originally arranged the contract, and then failed to look into it carefully enough and to realise that it was totally inadequate and that the programme as originally envisaged was not going to meet the needs.

The Government made the situation even worse by failing to admit openly at an early stage what the problems were, but the problems were not down to them originally. That would have made it easier perhaps—it should have made it easier; I am surprised that it did not—for them to be open about what problems still existed.

That written answer still left several questions. I should welcome the Minister giving some answers in her winding-up speech, if she can, to the questions that I intend to put. Clearly, there is still a major backlog of benefit claims that have not been properly processed through the computer because the programme is not yet able to do that. That backlog has to be cleared, even though a number of people have been paid benefits on the basis of manual calculations—the best that the various agencies can do is to work out roughly what the benefit claims should be.

Even though manual calculations are being done, all those claims will have to be re-checked once the computer system is up and running, so the first question is: how quickly is that backlog going to be cleared? What extra resources are the Government going to put into the clearing of that backlog and what are the costs of those resources? Clearly, that is an extra cost to the taxpayer, unless it can be reclaimed from Andersen Consulting, the contractors.

Secondly, personal pension providers have worries because they, too, have suffered as a result of the inadequacies of the programme and the fact that it has been so delayed. What compensation does the Minister expect to have to pay to personal pension providers as a result of the programme's failures?

Thirdly, do the Government foresee any additional compensation being paid by Andersen Consulting? Will the Contributions Agency seek any extra compensation? The report makes it plain that, apart from the compensation that has already been won from Andersen Consulting—some £3 million—there is a lot of lost savings due to the late implementation of the programme. Will the Government be adequately compensated for the lost savings as a result of the long delays?

Perhaps the most important question of all is: what will happen to the individuals who suffered as a result of the failure of the whole project? The answer that I received said that compensation would be considered for the individuals concerned within the normal rules of the departmental special payments scheme. I do not suppose that many of the people involved know what those rules are. I am not familiar with the full set of rules, and I do not know whether the Minister is. However, it would be interesting to know, for example, whether there will be any compensation for those who have had to pay extra costs just to fight their cases.

I took part in a local radio programme earlier this week dealing with telephone calls from people who had suffered as a result of the project's failure. Many callers complained about the number of letters that they had had to write and telephone calls that they had had to make to obtain a manual calculation of their benefits, given that those calculations could not be done by computer.

It seems unfair that those extra costs should be borne by people who by definition—because otherwise they would not be claiming the benefits involved—are among the poorest in society. They include new pensioners who may have to rely entirely on the state retirement pension, and who are therefore among the poorest of all our citizens. It is not fair that they should have to bear the cost of fighting for benefits that should have been paid automatically as a result of a computer calculation.

Hon. Members earn in the region of £40,000 a year and some of us may regard as comparatively small the amounts of money that are not being paid after the manual calculation has been performed. Those sums may be as little as £1.25 a week, but they are not insignificant for a person on a retirement pension of only a few tens of pounds. If the rules contain a threshold governing when compensation may be paid, it is possible that some of the amounts involved may be below that level. If so, I should be very sorry if, because of the project's failure, people were to lose out for ever on benefits to which they were entitled.

Will the Minister say what will happen in those rare but sad cases in which people die before the backlog is cleared and their payments are properly calculated? Given that many of the people involved are old age pensioners, such cases must exist. Will the relevant payments be made into those people's estates, or will the money simply be lost altogether?

It is not the fault of this Government that the contract was so badly managed, but people who have lost out deserve full compensation from the state, regardless of which Government are in charge. That compensation should take account of the back payments: it should also include a real allowance to cover the interest incurred in the cash flow costs that they have suffered and the extra costs involved in fighting for benefits that should have been paid automatically.

Finally, we need to learn the lessons from the fiasco of a project that has gone badly wrong. I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), who unfortunately has left the Chamber, say that the matter will be brought back before the Public Accounts Committee. However, I believe that we need a full independent inquiry into how and why such a totally inadequate contract came to be let to Andersen Consulting. Such an inquiry should also determine why

[Mr. David Rendel]

the Government have recovered so little in compensation payments when the project went so badly wrong. It is one for thing for such a project to go wrong; it would be much worse if we did not learn the lesson and get it right next time.

5.33 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): First, I congratulate the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), on her appointment. I hope that her career at the Treasury will be as successful as her predecessor's seems to have been.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), and to all the members of the Public Accounts Committee, for their work over the past 18 months: 67 reports in that period is a prolific output and a heavy work load.

The Committee's work and the investigations by the National Audit Office are crucial in helping all hon. Members to carry out one of our primary duties, which is to scrutinise the Executive. Bearing in mind what has happened in Europe, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden will never find himself suspended and on half pay as a result of blowing the whistle on waste and fraud and reporting such matters to Parliament.

In November 1997, my right hon. Friend summarised the role of the PAC in a typically pithy phrase:

"we in the PAC look for good practice to encourage and disseminate, bad practice to discourage and eliminate and improper practice to condemn and punish. In short . . . the good, the bad and the ugly."—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 476.]

The PAC and the National Audit Office concentrate on the bad, but scattered throughout the reports are nuggets of interesting and revealing good news about our public services. For example, the 32nd report on cataract surgery in Scotland points out that the number of operations to remove cataracts carried out there increased from 10,000 a year in 1992 to about 16,000 a year by 1997.

The 61st report on getting value for money in privatisations points out that, for nearly 20 years, the United Kingdom has led the world in the privatisation of state-owned businesses. The report could also have pointed out, but did not, that, as a result of the privatisation programme, state industries that once cost the Exchequer £50 million a week now contribute to it £65 million a week in corporation tax revenues.

The 28th PAC report on the Charity Commission points out that Britain has 184,000 registered charities, with an annual total income of £16 billion and assets of about £35 billion, which must be a good news story.

As we have heard, the 36th report on the water industry in England and Wales points out that, since privatisation, the quality of service has improved in a number of respects. It also highlights the fact that the privatised water companies are investing around £3 billion a year compared with £1.75 billion a year when they were state owned. The 59th report on the coastguard points out that, in 1995, it dealt with more 12,000 incidents in the UK search-and-rescue region.

One could find many more such examples, but the key role of the NAO is to find fault and there is plenty of fault to find, as we heard from the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner). The hon. Members for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) and for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) highlighted their and the PAC's concern about the Skye bridge project.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), in a thoughtful and interesting contribution on the nature of government and the ethos of the permanent Executive, used the Ministry of Defence to illustrate how Whitehall is not always as responsive as it ought to be to PAC reports and their conclusions.

Reflecting a continuing theme of the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) expressed his concern over the NAO's role following devolution and the problems that that may cause in terms of access. He made the important point that individual accounting officers, whether or not they are still in post, should be answerable to the Committee—a similar point to that made by the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) about permanent secretaries.

The hon. Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) was slightly more optimistic about the PAC's advice being adopted, citing its 61st report on privatisation as an example. She praised the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997 as an effective first step in tackling social security and housing benefit fraud.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) emphasised, as have others members of the PAC in this debate, the need for the Comptroller and Auditor General to be given access to non-departmental bodies and even into private sector companies that have contractual relationships with the state. He emphasised the fundamental importance of the PAC's work in exposing the complete shambles in the European Commission.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) is the only person I know who is pleased to receive his income tax bill, which I find slightly odd, so I will move straight on to my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson), who raised the important issue of the millennium bug, which was the subject of the PAC's 66th report.

In a slightly more partisan speech than was otherwise heard in the debate, the hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) said that market conditions were being blamed for the sale of the rolling stock leasing companies. He failed to mention that market conditions were severely affected by the statements of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short) when she was Labour's principal spokesman on transport.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), in a moving speech on resource accounting, highlighted the lack of accounting controls in the Ministry of Defence. He also mentioned fraud, both in the Department of Social Security and the European Union and made the important point that the National Audit Office does not have the same access powers as the European Court of Auditors.

The 46th report, on the contract to develop and update the national insurance recording system, or NIRS, caused concern and was mentioned by several hon. Members. The measured but critical conclusions of the Public Accounts Committee report foresaw the impending

disaster that struck the computer system only three months after its publication, despite the fact that not all the requested information was given. It stated:

"We are very concerned that the implementation of the new system is already nearly 18 months behind the date agreed . . . the Agency face an immense task catching up with their operations".

As the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) pointed out, last September the time came to transfer some 65 million records from NIRS1 to NIRS2, the biggest and most complex information technology project in Europe. The system collapsed. Thousands of records were wiped out, causing chaos in benefit offices and, undoubtedly, cases of hardship. Many newly retired pensioners have been paid pensions that ignore later year contributions. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden informed the House, this will be the subject of a future NAO and PAC report. The many lessons to be drawn about how to structure and manage such a colossal project are well documented in the 46th report, which will provide useful guidance for similar private finance initiative projects.

The 27th report, on measures to combat housing benefit fraud, reveals a catalogue of unacceptable complacency and waste. Some 4.5 million people receive housing benefit, costing £11.5 billion a year, of which some £1 billion to £2 billion is lost through fraud. That figure is unacceptably high. The PAC is right to conclude:

"The waste of public money on Housing Benefit fraud is massive and inexcusable, and it has gone on for far too long."

Much has been done in recent years to crack down on benefit fraud. The fraud hotline and all the spend-to-save initiatives are successful examples. Such initiatives must continue. Paragraph 7 states:

"Investment in anti-fraud work can be very cost effective".

That is true. The southern command team of the Benefits Agency Security Investigation Service, or BASIS, was so successful in the first sixth months of the year that its £2 million budget has been spent. Since September 1998, the BASIS teams have been standing idle. That is accounting madness; penny wise, pound foolish, as my grandmother would say. It is important that the Government continue to demonstrate that they are serious about tackling fraud and properly resource the spend-to-save initiatives.

The report also makes important observations about prosecuting those caught defrauding the system. It states:

"Fear of detection can be an effective deterrent against committing fraud, but only if it is backed up sufficient prosecutions and effective penalties."

However, the level of prosecutions by local authorities is incredibly low, at less than 1 per cent. of detected frauds.

On a Social Security Committee visit to the Benefits Agency a year ago, I asked a senior official about prosecutions. His response was that being caught was the deterrent and that prosecutions were therefore an unnecessary expense. I believe that that is wrong. If the only downside to putting in a fraudulent benefit claim is having perhaps to repay it one day, there is nothing to lose in putting in such a claim. That does not provide an effective deterrent. As the hon. Member for Reading, East said, the lack of prosecutions is an open invitation to fraudsters to help themselves to the pot of gold. Criminal prosecutions followed by the possibility of gaol is a deterrent. Local authorities and the DSS should, in the view of Conservative Members and of the PAC, prosecute far more often.

Despite repeated PAC criticisms over many years, it seems that the DSS is not adequately dealing with the issue. Last week, for the 10th successive year, the Benefits Agency had its accounts qualified by the National Audit Office because of fraud. Yesterday, the NAO qualified the accounts of the national insurance fund because of fraud.

Social security fraud pales compared with fraud in the European Commission. The 35th report examined the European Court of Auditors for 1996 and concluded:

"We are disappointed to find that standards of financial management and accounting across the Community are still too low; and that there is evidence of waste, error and fraud".

It is estimated that £6 billion is lost through fraud from the total EU budget of £65 billion. That is 10 per cent. Fake contracts, non-existent building projects and a culture of jobs for the boys or jobs for one's dentist seem to be rife in the European Commission. EU fraud is a black hole into which billions of pounds of taxpayers' money is pouring. Neither the European Commission nor, I am afraid to say, the British Government, are doing enough about it.

According to Paul Van Buitenen, the Dutch auditor who was rewarded for his disclosures by suspension on half pay, a number of EU Commissioners were themselves involved in irregularities. Even more worrying is the claim by Bernhard Friedmann, the German president of the European Court of Auditors, that his investigations had been hindered in every way and that the Commission had told him untruths.

My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire made a telling point when he said in last year's PAC debate that the National Audit Office should extend its work into examination of European financial affairs. He said:

"I suspect that the NAO might be slightly more rigorous than some other bodies in tracing where the money goes, finding out how it is spent and ensuring that we get value for money."—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 489.]

Subsequent events have proved that something is needed to deal with the problem of EU fraud.

In last year's debate, the then Financial Secretary, now the Paymaster General, said that the NAO had been invited to audit the assumptions underlying the forecasts of public finances. The Chancellor, the Financial Secretary and other Treasury Ministers have made much of that as an important step in openness. However, the Opposition fear that that innovation has not been properly implemented, and that the good offices of the CAG have been used simply to serve the Government's political purpose.

I cite as an example the CAG's first report in June 1997 on the Government's assumptions on unemployment. He said:

"As a level assumption for claimant unemployment, the figure of 1.65 million would seem consistent with the available independent assessment of unemployment prospects."

In other words, 1.65 million was a reasonable assumption for a flat unemployment level for the years covered by the Red Book. However, in subsequent government documents, that figure was reduced. In the November 1998 pre-Budget report, a figure of 1.3 million unemployed was used as the assumption on which the public finances were based.

The NAO was not asked by the Government to audit any of the changed figures. If the Government wish the figures that they use in documents to be audited by the

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

NAO, that must be done consistently or not at all. Otherwise, all that the Government are doing is abusing the office of the CAG, something that the Opposition would condemn.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden has said, the integrity of measures of public performance needs to be iron-clad. So, instead of asking the NAO to provide them with political cover, the Government would be better advised to ask it to audit the value for money of some of their flagship schemes such as the new deal, which the Opposition feel represents poor value for money for taxpayers.

This has been an important debate on the vital work of the NAO and the PAC. As my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) said during a previous PAC debate, for corruption or waste in the public finances,

"sunlight is the best disinfectant".—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 517.]

The PAC has done a great deal to shed light on such issues. We look forward to the Financial Secretary's telling us about the Government's proposals to strengthen further the role of the NAO and the PAC in their work as guardians of the taxpayer's money.

5.50 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I thank most warmly all the right hon. and hon. Members who have participated for the high standard of the debate. This is my first appearance at the Dispatch Box in my new role as Financial Secretary to the Treasury and I thank most heartily all the hon. Members who have welcomed me; I cannot think of a more important debate on which to make my first appearance in my new role. My officials and my predecessor told me about the high standard of work, the dedication and the all-party approach that these vital issues command, and I am delighted that their comments have been vindicated by today's debate.

I thank the Public Accounts Committee for all its hard work over the past year. By any standard, the Committee has had an exceptionally busy year, producing 67 reports, which must be close to a record. A feature of all those reports is the thoroughness with which the members of the Committee have tackled the subject and the fact that, quite rightly, the reports are hard hitting. Much has been made this afternoon of the historic role of the PAC and the fact that it exists to hold the Executive to account, to carry out the most important part of Parliament's scrutinising role by ensuring that taxpayers' money is spent properly and wisely, and to ensure that Ministers and officials account for that money properly.

The Committee must be congratulated on the way in which it has highlighted waste, inefficiency and fraud, as well as identifying and promoting good practice. The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), whom I thank for his kind words, made a good point when he emphasised good practice. The reports contain outstanding examples of good practice, and both the Government and the Committee want that to be promulgated throughout Whitehall.

One of the reasons why the Committee has been so productive is the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). Both the House and the country are well served by his hard work. We should also be grateful to the new members of the Committee and to those who have done sterling work over many years, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), and the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), who cannot be with us today. It is a particular pleasure for me to serve in this area with the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page), who was my immediate predecessor at the Department of Trade and Industry. I also thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle), who has continued to serve as a member of the Committee in the new Parliament.

Our thanks must also go to the National Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Audit Office and their respective Comptrollers and Auditors General for all their work. Good-quality auditing is essential to provide an assurance that public money has been well and properly spent. The task facing all those bodies is enormous and no one should underestimate it. We are lucky to have organisations of such calibre, which carry out their work so effectively.

No fewer than eight of the Committee's reports deal with privatisation and all make important and valuable points. The hearing on the sale of the rolling stock companies was one of the most memorable, as the Committee heard how a small number of former British Rail managers had made huge windfall gains of between £15 million and £33 million through their investment in those companies. That issue was dealt with by my hon. Friends the Members for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) and for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell). The Committee was absolutely right to draw attention to those excesses. Gains like that risk discrediting privatisation as a whole, and, in future sales, we will need to put in place mechanisms designed to prevent any recurrence.

The Committee's 61st report, "Getting Value for Money in Privatisations", sets out lessons derived from all the Committee's reports on privatisation. My hon. Friends the Members for Shipley, for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) and for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) pointed out correctly that lessons must be learned. We agree that the lessons set out in this valuable report should be taken into account by Departments. However, it is important that Departments be allowed to exercise judgment in seeking the best possible deal for the taxpayer, rather than slavishly following a detailed set of rules. I assure all hon. Members that those lessons will be widely disseminated, and I shall ensure that they are learned by all Departments. That is absolutely essential as far as the Treasury's role is concerned: we must ensure that this guidance is recognised centrally and reflected in all Departments.

There has also been discussion of other areas. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) referred to the 46th report, "The Contract to Develop and Update the Replacement National Insurance Recording System". As he will be aware, that system contains 65 million accounts, and there were bound to be major challenges in changing to a new computer system of that size. However, in all honesty, I must admit that it is disappointing that delays have occurred in relation to retirement pensions and widows benefit, for example. The hon. Gentleman highlighted very well what that means to the people who value and gain from that service. He was right to point out the consequences for those individuals.

I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that every effort is made to minimise the impact on clients. In most cases, any delays have been overcome by using contingency measures. I also reassure the hon. Gentleman that no records were destroyed during the development and conversion or as a result of live processing.

The hon. Gentleman raised several other points. The contractor, Andersen Consulting, has had to bear the associated costs of the revised implementation plan. In addition, Andersen's has had to pay £3.7 million in compensation to date. The hon. Gentleman also raised some wider points regarding social security issues, and I shall undertake to ensure that he receives a satisfactory reply to all those questions.

Turning to wider issues, I am delighted to inform the House that excellent progress continues to be made on public and private partnership projects, including private finance projects. I shall bring the House up to date on a few developments. Since May 1997, we have signed projects with an aggregate capital value of £4 billion—which, incidentally, compares with approximately £7 billion in the five years before then. Hospitals and schools and other vital public services across the country will benefit.

There was a discussion about the Skye bridge to which the hon. Members for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) and for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) contributed. I assure them that we are aware of their keen interest in this subject and understand the sensitivities of tolling in this case. It is important to remember that tolls have always been lower than the equivalent ferry fares, but as the hon. Gentlemen would acknowledge, the Government acted quickly to reduce tolls for regular users.

I am absolutely confident that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has thoroughly considered the many points put to him by the hon. Gentlemen. I understand that the courts in Scotland have also considered various issues relating to procurement for the bridge. The Government welcome the Public Accounts Committee's recognition of the important role that public-private partnerships can play in delivering public services. I can tell the hon. Gentlemen that the lessons from the Skye bridge project have already informed best practice guidance for subsequent projects.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West put several detailed points to me. I assure him that the Government will respond to those in full.

Many of the reports produced by the Committee during the past year focus on the need to improve value for money in the provision of public services. Two such reports are mentioned in the motion. The 32nd report, on cataract surgery in Scotland, calls for greater consistency of performance between similar institutions and advocates greater use of benchmarking. I entirely accept that benchmarking, whether between institutions or regions, is a valuable technique for improving value for money.

There has been much discussion this afternoon about devolution and its effects, and the contribution of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden has been acknowledged. I say to all hon. Members that we want to make sure that the lessons of best practice after devolution are widely spread. The Committee, the Government and I want that.

The 44th report, on the administration of the disability allowance in Northern Ireland, provides a valuable insight into the performance of the Social Security Agency. The report is valuable in so far as it highlights the need for the agency to keep abreast of developments in Great Britain in protecting its systems against fraud.

The Government are absolutely determined to improve value for money in public services. Two initiatives have been mentioned: the introduction of public service agreements and greater cross-departmental working in the delivery of public services. My hon. Friends the Members for Shipley and for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) spoke about the importance of public service agreements, which were first published last month in a White Paper entitled "Public Services for the Future: Modernisation, Reform, Accountability". The White Paper sets out clear aims and objectives and specific targets for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the services that the public receive and are entitled to receive at a high standard.

Linking the investment of public money to the delivery of specified outputs and standards of efficiency is a major step forward in improving value for money. It is also a significant improvement in accountability—that is the aim of the Committee's work—making it much easier for Parliament and the general public to judge the Government's effectiveness in meeting their objectives.

The second initiative concerns a much greater emphasis on effective cross-departmental working. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden and I might have a discussion about what phrase should be used. I like the phrase "joined-up government". Using resources well is not just a matter of providing stability, flexibility and the right incentives; it is also important to ensure that Departments and other bodies work effectively together to deliver public service objectives, as all hon. Members want. The key challenges in joined-up government are not only to identify better routes for delivering services to the public but to ensure that we maintain clear lines of accountability.

There has been much discussion about resource accounting and budgeting. Important points were made by Conservative Members, including the hon. Members for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) and for Bexhill and Battle, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central.

We greatly welcome the Committee's continuing vigilance over the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting, as set out in its 67th report. We have absolutely no doubt that resource accounting and budgeting will enhance the quality of financial information available to the House and will enable Departments to manage their resources more effectively on behalf of the taxpayer. There is considerable agreement about the fact that that is the way forward.

As the Committee knows, our intention, subject to Parliament's approval, is to implement resource accounting and budgeting fully from 2001-02. In the meantime, in response to the question put to me by the hon. Member for Cotswold, we propose to report to Parliament on progress at defined "trigger points". The Committee's approval of the trigger point strategy is most welcome, and I am delighted that all Departments have successfully achieved the first trigger point—stage 1 approval—before the December 1998 deadline. I can tell the hon. Member for Cotswold, and my hon. Friends who raised the same issue, that it is an important matter for the

[Mrs. Barbara Roche]

Department and for me, and I shall work with the Committee to make sure that we get the implementation absolutely right. I fully share the Committee's view of its importance.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden also mentioned parliamentary involvement in the validation of performance information. I understand what he says, but I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and the Committee will recognise that, unlike the position with regard to financial information, there is as yet no agreed set of standards for performance information. My Department believes that the appropriate way to proceed is to develop such standards. I undertake to keep the matter under review and to consult other interested parties, including the NAO. I may not be able to give the right hon. Gentleman the reply that he seeks, but I undertake to keep in close contact with him and the Committee on this issue.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Would the hon. Lady be prepared to examine the performance indicators published by executive agencies to see whether there were any useful lessons to be learned for Government Departments?

Mrs. Roche: I certainly undertake to consider that, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his helpful suggestion.

Quite rightly, mention was made this afternoon of the great concern felt about the loss of public funds through fraud, which was highlighted in several of the Committee's reports. The motion that we are debating refers to the Committee's 34th report, which deals with the further fraud at the British embassy in Amman. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has rightly acknowledged that there were failures in basic financial controls, and financial controls and disciplinary arrangements are being tightened.

Frankly, I fully accept that one of the most disturbing features of the case is that it happened so soon after the Committee took evidence on other irregularities at the same embassy. It is imperative—I hope that careful note will be taken of what I say—that, where the Committee highlights failings, effective corrective action is taken swiftly.

Another issue dealt with this afternoon—my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East referred to it in great detail—is the content of the Committee's 27th report, entitled "Measures to Combat Housing Benefit Fraud". The Green Paper on fraud, which was published in July, sets out what we intend to do to tackle welfare fraud. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security is determined to minimise losses that occur through fraud and error so that he can increase the resources available to meet genuine need, which is what we all want.

My predecessor, the Paymaster General, took part in a joint Treasury-NAO seminar on the subject of tackling the risk of fraud. She was impressed by the determination and expertise that Departments bring to bear to counter fraud risks. She also noted the valuable contribution of the national audit agencies, including the work of the Audit Commission, in areas such as data matching.

Hon. Members have referred to the European Union. The Government have consistently supported measures to strengthen the financial management of the EU budget, and we shall do everything we can to fight fraud. We used the United Kingdom presidency of the European Union to ensure that Council conclusions focused on the real areas of concern—over-budgeting, poor objective setting, over-complex legislation and little real evaluation of results.

I dealt with structural funds in a former incarnation in the Department of Trade and Industry, so I understand the points that were made about delays in payment. We welcome the German presidency's proposals for an independent, high-level group to consider ways to strengthen the fight against fraud.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Does the hon. Lady agree that fraud is endemic in the European Union? The only way to eliminate fraud is to do away with the regimes in which fraud is deep-rooted and endemic.

Mrs. Roche: I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, but I suspect that he and I have different views on the European Union. The Government and members of the PAC are committed to ensuring that proper proposals are in place. We shall act vigorously in conjunction with our European Union colleagues, particularly in the Council of Ministers, to ensure that, when fraud occurs, every possible measure is taken to deal with it.

Mr. Wardle: When the hon. Lady talks to her German counterparts about the initiative that they are proposing under their EU presidency, will she suggest that one of the players in that investigation should be our Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir John Bourn?

Mrs. Roche: I note the hon. Gentleman's point, but he will forgive me if I do not give him an instant reply. That point has also been made by other hon. Members.

I shall deal with the important issue of NAO access, which has been raised by several hon. Members. I agree with the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) made a thoughtful speech on this subject. I listened carefully to the points made in the debate. When I came to this brief, I recognised that this was a major issue for the Committee.

I hope that the Committee and the House will appreciate that we have approached the issue of access positively. We were quick to legislate to provide the NAO access to the lottery operator for the purposes of auditing the national lottery distribution fund. We have also made arrangements for NAO access in connection with the grants in aid for the occupied royal palaces. I think it is right to say that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden has acknowledged some of the improvements that we have made. When we have created new agencies, such as the regional development agencies, we have proposed that the Comptroller and Auditor General should be the auditor. Those are positive steps forward.

I am aware that there have been a number of discussions in the past year on other access issues, such as the possibility of giving the Comptroller and Auditor General a right of access to Government contractors and making him the auditor of publicly owned companies.

On Government contractors, the Government's approach is to provide for NAO access where that is necessary for the financial or value-for-money audit of a Department or agency. Broadly speaking, that will be when all the information necessary for the audit is not held by the audited body.

On publicly owned companies, I understand that the NAO already has access to many of the bodies concerned. Where statute requires the auditor of an non-departmental public body to be a Companies Act auditor, the NAO will have inspection rights. It will also have access through contract clauses to bodies such as training and enterprise councils.

In the short time since taking on my new post, I have not been able to form a final view on whether any further concessions should be made, although I am aware that there are strong arguments against making further changes. Nevertheless, before reaching a final decision, I would be happy to talk through the issues with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden and the Comptroller and Auditor General. I hope that that approach will be helpful to the PAC. I was conscious of the fact that I wanted to listen to what hon. Members had to say in this debate and to have some further discussions with them before reaching a final view. I hope that that will be helpful to the House.

I was delighted that, in October, the four national audit agencies launched the Public Audit Forum with the very clear message that

"Good government needs good audit".

That is a positive example of the spread of good practice. It will strengthen co-operation among the national audit agencies, promote the setting of common standards and help to minimise the burden of audit on audited bodies.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) spoke about the millennium bug difficulties. The hon. Gentleman and I have not always agreed on the method by which one tackles that important issue, but I shall take this opportunity to pay tribute to him. He was the first hon. Member to raise the issue and he has done the House a great service. When the issue was raised initially, it was not thought to be important. In fact, it is very important and the hon. Gentleman has pioneered work in that respect.

As the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East knows, the Government take this issue seriously. That is why we formed Action 2000 and gave it the resources necessary to continue the job. It is also why, under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, there is considerable action taking place throughout Government. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his tireless work.

A great deal has been said today about follow-up activity and there have been many thoughtful remarks about the very nature of the PAC. A great deal of work goes on, but do the Government and Whitehall listen? It is for all of us to ensure that we do, and it is for the PAC to look at how the follow-up activity is implemented. I very much want to work with the Committee to ensure that that takes place.

We all realise that good managers, whether in Government or outside, need to remember the old lessons as well as the newer ones. In looking back, I was struck by how the Committee's reports continue to illustrate both those points. Some of the most notable instances of fraud arise because of basic failures in the elementary oversight of basic controls, in authorising payments on the basis of hand-written documents or treating delivery notes as invoices. We need to make sure that basic controls are being implemented. As to newer lessons, I am confident that the Committee's recommendations on privatisation will provide a coherent and constructive source of guidance.

More generally, I was struck by the clear, firm and constructive nature of the reports, even when they were critical, as they often were. I am sure that the breadth of the Committee's efforts and its energy will keep us all on our toes.

I look forward to working next year with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, with the Committee and with the House in ensuring that the House and the people of the United Kingdom—whom we are so privileged to serve—get value for money from their public services and receive the very best public services we can possibly provide for them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of the 1st to 67th Reports of the Committee of Public Accounts of Session 1997–98, and of the Treasury Minutes and Northern Ireland Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda on these Reports (Cm 3880, 3893, 3894, 3936, 3955, 3973, 4004, 4015, 4021, 4041, 4055, 4060, 4069, 4075) with particular reference to the following Reports:

Twenty-seventh, Measures to Combat Housing Benefit Fraud (HC 366);

Thirty-second, Cataract Surgery in Scotland (HC 546);

Thirty-fourth, Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Irregular Payments at the British Embassy in Amman, Jordan (HC 553);

Forty-fourth, Northern Ireland Social Security Agency: The Administration of the Disability Allowance (HC 527);

Forty-sixth, The Contract to Develop and Update the Replacement National Insurance Recording System (HC 472);

Sixty-first, Getting Value for Money in Privatisations (HC 992);

Sixty-seventh, HM Treasury: Resource Accounting and Resource-Based Supply (HC 731).

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That—

(1) the Order of the House of 2nd December relating to sittings of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee shall have effect with the substitution of the words '2.30 p.m.' for the words '10.30 a.m.';

(2) the matter of the Discussion Paper entitled "Putting it Right—the case for change in Northern Ireland's hospital service", being a matter relating exclusively to Northern Ireland, be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee for its consideration; and

(3) at the sitting on Thursday 28th January—

(i) the Committee shall consider the matter referred to it under paragraph (2) above;

(ii) the Chairman shall interrupt proceedings at 5 p.m.; and

(iii) at the conclusion of those proceedings, a motion for the adjournment of the Committee may be made by a Minister of the Crown pursuant to Standing Order No. 116 (5) (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings)).—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Neil Gerrard be added to the Environmental Audit Committee.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Fisheries

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

6.21 pm

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): I am grateful for this opportunity to address the House on a serious issue which I hope will interest the House—the sustainability of fisheries.

Few hon. Members will be aware of a significant conference that was held in London last Monday. It was essentially a workshop to consider the crisis facing the world's oceans, in preparation for the April United Nations meeting in America, on sustainable development. The conference was sufficiently important for the Deputy Prime Minister to agree to give the keynote address, in which he identified some of the concerns which he felt were becoming increasingly prominent not only among the scientific community but among the world's responsible fishing communities. However, the need to act swiftly was urged not on the British Government but on others. I believe that the British Government could be doing much more to take a lead in protecting both our own and other countries' fishing stocks.

If we are to discuss and make proposals on managing the world's oceans, it is critical that we should understand the over-fishing crisis. My belief—which has been formed by consulting with scientists and responsible bodies working on the issue; there are no party political points to be made on the issue—is that the policy currently being pursued by the British and other Governments, by continuing to set quotas that are incompatible with sustainable fisheries, is presenting huge risks. The fact is that more than half the stocks exploited by United Kingdom fishermen are below safe limits or are in danger of falling below those limits.

Sustainability is far from being treated as a crucial, central issue in debates on the future of the common fisheries policy. I acknowledge that sustainability plays its role in debates, and that lip service is paid to it, but, when it comes to the crunch, it is not at the heart of the way in which common fisheries policy is formulated. Current fishing practices have been based on inaccurate data, sometimes on a wilful disregard of scientific evidence and on a failure to consider the long-term consequences of current policies.

In some ways, the arguments about sustainable fisheries, and the way in which those arguments are reported, resemble the debate, a decade ago, on fears about global warming. A decade ago, that evidence was ignored, and the scientists dealing with it were dismissed as eccentric or as scaremongers. Today, we are facing the consequences of ignoring their advice, of failing to understand that they were not eccentric and of undermining what they were telling us. Global warming is now a crisis, and the world must face a more serious problem than it would have had to face had we been more responsible and appreciated the demands of a sustainable environment and of sustainable environmental policy.

At least some of the Deputy Prime Minister's arguments about oceans reflected a growing body of opinion in this country. Those opinions come from organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; which is interested in oceans because of its concern about the conservation of sea birds, as well as newer bodies such as the Marine Stewardship Council, in which I declare an interest as an unpaid director.

The Deputy Prime Minister spoke about the crisis facing fisheries. It is well known that 60 per cent. of the world's fish resources are in danger of being over-exploited. He spoke of the need for effective regional agreements to encourage responsible fisheries and sustainable harvests. He assured the conference that the Government take the issue seriously, but that demands much more than they are currently delivering—not rhetoric, but action now.

In summing up, the Deputy Prime Minister said that the thrust of his remarks was to improve public understanding of what is happening to the seas. He spoke of the need for a barometer that people understand. The real need now is not for greater public understanding—the public are beginning to understand ever more about the problem—but for more Government action and help to create a climate in which we can move significantly towards a more responsible and sustainable fisheries policy.

Tonight's debate goes to the heart of the subject of the oceans workshop and concerns about the future of our seas. It is significant that it is to be answered not by a Minister from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but by one from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. That is not a surprise, because that is how we have always done business, but as we have learnt ever more about sustainable fisheries, we have come to understand the need for close integration of environmental policy with fisheries policy. That division is one of the Government's problems in addressing the issue. The Minister replying to this debate speaks from one Department, but the Deputy Prime Minister speaks from another. Would the speech that the Minister will make tonight be the same if he had the environmental brief as well?

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does my hon. Friend accept that the difficulty with fisheries, particularly in the European Union—although this is also true elsewhere—is that fisheries Ministers could more correctly be referred to as fishermen's Ministers? They are fighting for their fishermen's share of the fish rather than ensuring that fish will be there for the fishermen of the future.

Mr. Woodward: My right hon. Friend makes a crucial and telling point, which I would like to develop. The fact that the debate is dealt with by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, not the Deputy Prime Minister is a symptom of the problem, not just for fish stocks, but for those employed in the fishing industry. Up to 200 million people across the world are employed in fishing and related industries. There has been an increase in the number of fishermen in the UK in the past year. A future fisheries policy must be more environmentally sensitive if fishing stocks are to be preserved and are to continue to provide jobs for people. The Government need to say more and to act more clearly to demonstrate that they understand that sustainable exploitation of natural

resources on land, in the sea or in the air that we breathe must be considered in the round. That will require more restraint, tougher quotas set by the Government and more difficult trade-offs with the industry.

There is no better example of the failure to grasp the need for sustainability than the devastation caused to fishing stocks and fishermen's livelihoods after the collapse of the Canadian grand banks in 1992. Until then the area was considered one of the world's richest sources of cod. Of course there had been the scaremongers—the scientists who had warned about over-fishing—but their warnings were regarded as simply eccentric. In 1992 one of the world's richest sources of cod collapsed overnight as a result of chronic over-fishing. The consequence was not only the devastation of the fish stocks and the appalling collapse of the cod stocks, but the loss of 40,000 jobs—nearly twice the number employed as fishermen in the United Kingdom today.

The fishery remains closed and there has been no significant recovery of the fish stocks. The ecosystem has undergone irreversible change. It is no longer a matter for the Canadian equivalent of MAFF because there are now no fishing interests to protect in the area. It is no longer a concern to the environmental interests in Canada because the fishing stock has been wiped out. We need to take note of the failure of the two Departments there to work hand in hand.

It would be interesting to hear from the Minister this evening what steps he believes need to be taken by his Department to achieve greater co-operation in terms of the action plans that need to be made by his Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

There have been many arguments for a precautionary approach. I welcome the steps taken by the European Union and I pay tribute to the role which I am sure the Minister played in the direction taken in the Council in December 1998—to apply a precautionary approach to catch limits.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): It was not uncontroversial.

Mr. Woodward: Indeed. No environmental policy is likely to be uncontroversial. I recognise that problem and that is why this is not a party political issue and an opportunity for the Opposition to take potshots at the Government. It will require consensus, but that needs to be built. The British Government can play a significant role in achieving that consensus.

Before one makes too much of the precautionary approach that was achieved at the Council in December 1998, it has to be recognised that it is no more and no less than what EU Ministers signed up to at the 1995 North Sea conference when they pledged to apply the precautionary principle to managing our fish stocks. There were three years between those two meetings, and that crucial loss of time will make a difference. We cannot say that we shall have another agreement now and in three years' time we may achieve another implementation and perhaps everything will be all right. We are being warned—just as we were warned about global warming 10 years ago—that action needs to be taken now, and not in three years' time.

It is interesting to refer back to the North Sea conference in 1995. The follow-up intermediate ministerial meeting conference in Bergen in 1997 pledged to draw up recovery plans for the most depleted stocks, giving priority to cod. In 1997 the EC conceded in its progress report on the IMM:

> "Up till now it has not been possible to establish a specific recovery plan for cod."

It is a disaster. Not months but years have elapsed, yet there is no specific recovery plan for cod. The establishment of a coherent recovery plan for cod remains a priority for EU member states. The problem is that the elements of such a recovery plan require much more robust protection of the seedcorn of the year-class. That requires agreements on no take zones to protect key stock concentrations. The British Government must punch above their weight to bring about far better responsible good practice by the fishing industry. The Government must begin to think about what they are going to do to reward those who do well and to discourage and punish those who are irresponsible.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, to whom I gave notice of my wish to intervene. I should like the Minister to clarify the position on conservation gone too far. I have a number of wreck fishing vessels for hire in my constituency, and owners are concerned that they will be restricted to three finned fish per boat. Those boats take 12 or more people out to sea, and they cannot share out three fish among 12 people. Anglers simply will not hire those vessels, and a very important industry—which is fishing-related, but not fundamentally about fish stocks—will be in trouble as a consequence of over-conservation. That aspect of the debate must be addressed by the Minister.

Mr. Woodward: It will be interesting to hear what the Minister has to say about that. However, it would be breathtaking to hear from the Minister this evening that he thought for one moment that in anything related to fishing policies we were in a state of over-conservation. The reality is far from that: the situation is desperate.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) should look at what has been said by organisations such as the RSPB. The society said that, with hindsight, the 40,000 Newfoundland fishermen who have been out of work since 1992 because of the grand banks cod collapse would have preferred a tough precautionary approach to the endless compromise, and what the hon. Gentleman described as "over-conservation". If we had had at that time a tough precautionary approach—which might have made it very difficult for the fishermen—there still would have been a fishing industry today, supplying jobs for those people.

The failure to look ahead and the preoccupation with the here and now in the face of the evidence means that we not only face a crisis but are marching knowingly and irresponsibly towards a position in which we will exhaust our fishing stocks around the world.

Mr. Sanders: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but I am referring to pleasure boats which have a restriction of one fish per angler, or 12 fish in a 12-person boat. Allegedly, that is being reduced to three finned fish per

[Mr. Sanders]

boat. This is, to coin a phrase, a drop in the ocean in comparison with the problem that the hon. Gentleman is raising.

Mr. Woodward: I should not spend too much time in this debate being preoccupied with drops in the ocean. Nobody wants to see anglers disturbed; as is the case with many other aspects of wildlife conservation, those engaged in a sport are often the best stewards for the continuation of an industry. It will be interesting to hear whether the Minister supports that view beyond fisheries and into other areas.

In the debate on the common fisheries policy a month ago, the Minister was at pains to speak of balance. The balance of which he speaks—albeit a politically understandable balance which he must produce in his Department—is, in fact, not a balance at all; it is a business of trading off the demands of the fishing industry with the growing sense of the crisis of the fishing stocks.

For the reasons outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) this evening, I believe that the difficulties that the Minister faces within the Department are historical. However, surely we should now break out of those historical chains, and recognise that they are doing enormous damage to the prospects of creating a sustainable fisheries policy.

The scale according to which the Government judge the balance is based on a critical assumption: what is the most that the catching sector can get away with? What is the largest amount of fish that can be extracted?

On the basis of the data and evidence that we now have, it appears that the position is, at best, a lottery. Given increasing scientific evidence about the way in which fishing stocks are being exhausted, it is hugely irresponsible to continue with some of our fishing policies, which will simply cause more and more devastation.

Let us take the example of Canada's grand banks. Getting it wrong will not only destroy fishing stocks, but throw thousands of people on to the dole. That will be the new deal for Britain's fishermen if the Government are not brave enough in the months ahead to come up with some tough and different policies on fisheries for the future.

The current safety thresholds for fishing stocks of European fish are based on defining the greatest number of fish that can be extracted—not safely extracted, just extracted. The calculation then becomes a target: the target is to leave the minimum number of fish in the sea. The Government are presiding over a policy that ignores the warnings that we are being given. We are gambling with very high stakes. Surely the time has come for the Government to ask not what is the most that can be extracted, but what is the most that we can responsibly extract. We should not think in terms of quotas for the most than can be extracted, per se.

At present, given the data that we have, the margins for error are all over the shop. If the wrong calculation is made, the results will be catastrophic. It is clear from the evidence that our current fishing policy is tantamount to a culture of chronic crisis.

The RSPB says:

"The sustainability of these stocks has, for the past few years, been dependent on the unpredictable incidence of the occasional year of above-average recruitment. This is a lottery and it is no substitute for rational management"

in the face of the information that we now have. The Government need to end the lottery and to preside over a process of rational management.

In some ways, the Deputy Prime Minister recognised that at the oceans workshop. We have learnt a little from the problems that were caused when the scientists' warnings about global warming were ignored a decade or so ago. Rhetoric, however, is not the same as action. We know that 60 per cent. of the world's most commercially important fish stocks are fully fished, over-fished or severely depleted, and Britain is not exempt from the crisis.

Can the Minister tell us this evening that the information on which he has based his quotas for this year is so reliable and comprehensive that the current fishing of the North sea definitely will not lead to a position like that of the grand banks in Canada? In fairness to him, I must say that he cannot tell us that. He should read the evidence provided by his own Ministry's 1988 report. On page 134, it states:

"In 1997-98 MAFF's Agency, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science . . . monitored the level of 31 stocks of fish and contributed detailed advice on their size composition to ICES.

A measure of the state of the stocks is the proportion fished by the UK and other EU fleets considered to be above the level (known as the minimum biological acceptable level) necessary to avoid an increasing risk that they will fail to reproduce themselves".

That figure might have been expected to decline if we were operating a responsible, sustainable fisheries policy; but in 1994 it was already 42 per cent. above the desired level. In 1995 it rose to 43 per cent. above the level, and in 1996, the last year for which the Ministry has published data, it rose to a massive 51 per cent. above it. The risk has increased every year; it has not gone down. The jump from 1995-96 should alarm everyone—and it should alarm the Minister most of all.

As the Deputy Prime Minister said, we do not simply need the general public to understand more; we need them to be reassured that the Government understand the figures and will not just speak about the problem, but take action on it.

The deputy director of CEFAS—the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science—warned in 1995 that

"we have never been here before and we don't know how long we can sustain viable fishing stocks . . . or whether the marine ecosystem will allow stocks ever to recover to previous levels."

Those are not my words, but those of the deputy director of CEFAS. Surely, that is at the heart of the issue that we need to discuss. There is no question of over-conservation when we have a warning of that nature.

The former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), showed again that he understood the danger in a letter of August last year, where he cited concern about the state of North sea cod stocks:

"It is certainly the case that North Sea cod stocks are now at 'uncharted low levels' and all fisheries managers are aware of the poor state of those stocks."

However, the problem is that, instead of taking heed of that warning and doing something about it, he immediately drew comfort:

"Even at these low levels there are still some 400 million individual cod in the North Sea of one year of age or more and I understand that the latest scientific information is that there has been a good recruitment of juvenile cod to the fishery."

Hooray—there has been a good recruitment of juvenile cod to the fishery, but the problem is that that demonstrates all too sadly that there is only partial understanding. UK waters may be awash with juvenile fish, but that is exactly all that there is. The recruitment may be there because that is all there is left; we have exhausted the older, mature fish.

The crucial question for the Minister is not how many individual cod of one year of age or more may be in the North sea, but how many individual cod of four years of age or more are in the North sea, because it is only at the age of four years or more that those fish will begin to breed. Again, it would be interesting to know whether the Minister could tell us that figure. I suspect that he cannot because, in all fairness, we have not understood, until now, the crucial nature of having such information.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I am listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman. Is he suggesting that there should be a total closure of North sea cod fisheries, or that there should be an alternative mechanism for catching cod that would involve the extension of the net mesh? I am interested to hear what he puts forward as alternative suggestions.

Mr. Woodward: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will come specifically to that point.

I know that, like his predecessor, the Minister has been concerned with the problem of discarding; I know that he cares about the issue. The scale of juvenile undersize fish has undoubtedly been a root cause of the tragic rise of discard rates in recent years. If one thinks that through, one is saying that a high proportion of the fish that are caught have to be discarded because they are below the legal minimum landing size.

If that problem is not dealt with adequately, it will simply compound itself. The tragedy in the North sea for cod can be seen all too clearly from the fact that half, by number, of all the cod and haddock that are caught in the North sea are thrown back dead into the sea because they are too small. Those figures are alarming in themselves. We know that the North sea cod fishery is also riding its luck. It would be foolish in the extreme to suggest that an exceptionally good recruitment year in 1996 demonstrates that fish stocks have recovered completely. Far from it: one good year of recovery is cause neither for celebration nor complacency.

As we discussed earlier, Ministers promised in 1997 to prioritise a cod recovery plan. The 1996 juveniles are now the three-year-old mainstay of the fishery, but only if they have not been caught or were not part of the half by number thrown back dead into the sea. The Minister will know that the scientific evidence worries bodies such as the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas, which has stated that it remains

"pessimistic about the likelihood of noteworthy improvement of the cod stock in the medium term."

That is surely very worrying.

Tonight, the Minister has an opportunity to say whether he believes in the quotas in whose agreement he played a part, and whether they go far enough. He will know that scientists recommended a cut of 11 per cent. in the 1999 cod quota. That was moderated by the European Commission—not up, but down to just 5 per cent. Will the Minister say whether the Government will be party to any further dilution of the advice designed to restore North sea cod stocks? I hope that he will confirm that they will not.

I accept that the fishing industry would be very angry at such a response. However, that is the difficulty facing a Minister who must recognise the importance of the environmental factors involved. If those factors are not taken into account, there will be no fishing interests to preside over in the future, because neither the fish stocks nor the jobs will exist.

The German presidency has launched an initiative to protect young cod from over-fishing and to give them a chance to mature. Will the Minister take this opportunity to align the Government behind that initiative, as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has asked already, to create an area in the German bight that would be closed to cod fishing in 1999?

The acid question is not "Where are we now?", but "Where will sustainable fisheries, fish stocks and the fishing industry be in five years' time?" Unilever, which makes Bird's Eye fish fingers—and I could cite other corporations—has begun to face the problem square on. It has realised that there will be no cod for fish fingers in five or 10 years' time unless sustainable fisheries are adopted as the way forward. At present, the fishing industry presides over dwindling fish stocks that depend on the lottery of rare years of good recruitment. Should not the Minister be saying more to bring together the interests of the industry and of the environment, and to produce a concerted effort to restore stocks to a level that will provide long-term and sustainable catches, with high proportions of mature fish? That would guarantee that the 200 million people in the world whose livelihoods depend on such factors will continue to have jobs.

Although it will be difficult, Britain has an opportunity to set an example, to take a lead in the matter and to punch above its weight—not only in the radical reform of the EU's common fisheries policy but also in the world as a whole.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I sense that my hon. Friend is approaching the end of his remarks, but will he say whether he intends to refer to the huge tonnage of mature, saleable fish that is dumped back, dead, into the sea? I listened carefully to his description of the huge number of fish thrown back dead because they are considered to be too small. Is he worried that the European Commission's recent reduction in the minimum landing size for certain species will make the problem even worse? It will not have escaped my hon. Friend's attention that, under the new quotas for this year, the quotas for sand eels will be maintained at their previous rate. Many people regard that species as an essential food for future fish stocks in general.

Mr. Woodward: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and I hope that he will understand from what I am about to say that I have recognised that

[Mr. Woodward]

problem. However, in a relatively short Adjournment debate it is impossible to explore all aspects of the matter. My hon. Friend and other hon. Members rehearsed many of the arguments in the debate shortly before the House rose for Christmas. I am concentrating on this aspect this evening, because I want to tease out from the Minister whether we can move on from simply recognising that this is yet another problem and can arrive at a situation where we see all the problems and begin to recognise the need to do more before there is nothing left to be done.

I and certain organisations believe that a full study of all the United Kingdom fish stocks needs to be carried out over a number years with directly comparable figures. As the Minister will readily recognise, no full study has been carried out with comparable data and so we have constant difficulty in producing meaningful information. Without the information it is difficult to produce constructive policies with which we can proceed sensibly. Perhaps the Minister will tell the House whether the Government will agree to make additional funding available for that sort of exhaustive study of UK fish stocks to produce the comparable data.

In addition, certification schemes are beginning to emerge. Can the Minister tell us tonight to what extent he believes that voluntary certification is the way forward for the fishing industry? I make no apology for pushing that matter. As a director of the Marine Stewardship Council, I know that it has been at the centrepiece of the work that that organisation has been doing since it was set up by an initial grant from Unilever and the World Wide Fund for Nature. The MSC wants certification to be at the heart of future fisheries policies and wants consumers to be made aware of the labelling that would go with certification so that they are encouraged to choose those products over non-certified fish.

So far, the response from retailers and the industry in the United Kingdom has been constructive and there have been constructive approaches from those within the fishing industry, who recognise that the long-term policies that we are pursuing will probably leave us with no fishing stocks to fish.

At the oceans conference, the Deputy Prime Minister talked of the need for

"a whole series of actions where international agreement and support is needed to respond to the threats from human activities to the seas."

The certification programme would offer just that.

The Deputy Prime Minister has said that we need to find such a solution. The truth is that we have found it. The industry, retailers and consumers believe that certification can work—they have demonstrated it in other areas of environmental policy. Tonight, the Minister has an opportunity to tell the House his views on the policies of the MSC—if he is not fully aware of them, I am sure that the council will willingly brief him, or, if he has had one briefing, give him another. The British Government have the opportunity to join other signatories and bodies from around the world that are queuing up to come behind that policy. Other countries are beginning to recognise that sustainable fisheries can be produced only through international co-operation, which has to be based on market solutions. Those will best come about speedily through a voluntary certification programme.

Perhaps the Minister will tell the House his views of the certification programme this evening. The crucial thing is that the Minister is stuck in a Department that has historically been concerned with the fishing industry.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Mr. Woodward: It is vital that the Minister recognise the demands of the fishing industry and the fishermen. No one would suggest that that cannot be done, but the long-term interests of fishermen in Britain, the European Union and around the world will be protected only if we fundamentally shift fisheries policies away from the current minimum target quota system to a responsible, sustainable, environmentally friendly policy that, in the long term, will continue to provide jobs for people in Britain and throughout the world.

7 pm

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): I declare an interest as the unpaid chairman of the Marine Stewardship Council and as the Member for a constituency with 74 miles of coastline and many small fishermen. I welcome the opportunity that the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) creates to consider sustainable fishing.

I congratulate the Minister on the tough stance that he has taken several times in fighting for the sustainability of our fish stocks. I recognise that his job—I did it longer than anyone—is not easy because the fishing industry is self-destructive in that every section finds reasons to defend its practices against those of other nations or other parts of the nation.

I well remember fishermen on the west of Scotland telling me that if only those on the east of Scotland behaved as they did, everything would be all right. Fishermen in the south-west explained that if only the Scots behaved like them, it would all be all right. The British said that if only the rest of Europe behaved like us, it would all be all right. Exactly the same is said in Holland, Denmark, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal; it is always someone else who is at fault.

The House has a responsibility, as far as possible, to support measures, albeit unpopular ones, that a Government of any sort seek to take to protect the future of our fishing industry. Having congratulated them, we must press the Government to move further. I have some practical suggestions that the Minister might like to accept.

First, the Minister is right to realise that the answers cannot be found nationally. Fish do not carry any flag on their fins; they swim where they wish. There is no such thing as a Scottish, English, French or German fish. We have always shared fishing grounds and argued about them. There is nothing wrong with a common fisheries policy. It is the policy, not the commonness, that is wrong. We must find a common answer for a common stock in a common resource. That has always been true.

The Minister must find the answers within the common fisheries policy, which has given the UK defence of an amount of fish in line with our historic position. If one looks back over the matter, it has been rather more

generous than many would have thought. I have looked back very carefully because of the sort of criticisms that are made. He is right to work within the Community, but I hope that he will take a series of clear stands. I hope that all hon. Members will support him if he does.

Mr. Gill: I know that my right hon. Friend is a staunch defender of the common fisheries policy. Does he recognise that that which everyone owns, no one owns? There is no incentive for fishermen to protect or conserve stocks when they know that what they conserve benefits someone else. "Someone else" in the context of the European Union is another member state. When my right hon. Friend gave examples of countries that were dissatisfied with the present arrangements, he listed only members of the EU. Has it not occurred to him that some countries are satisfied with their fisheries regime? Some feel that conservation activities are conducted in a much more satisfactory way under the present arrangements and that they have satisfactory fisheries. I instance Norway, Iceland, the Falkland Islands and even Namibia.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman is exceeding his licence.

Mr. Gummer: My hon. Friend is fiercely opposed to the EU, and I understand that, but fisheries are a common resource because we all own them. The only way in which the Icelanders could introduce their system was by stealing a resource that they previously shared. They decided that what was previously a shared resource was theirs. If my hon. Friend thinks that we are going to say to the French, "That which we have shared with you for ever we are going to take into our control", he is talking nonsense. There is no possibility of managing our fisheries except together.

It is a terribly sad view of the world to suggest that we cannot co-operate with our neighbours; that we can deal only with stuff that we own in a narrow, partisan way. That is not the way forward for the future. That is not what is happening throughout the EU. It is not what is happening in the rest of the world. It is not what the Canadians have discovered in dealing with the Americans over Atlantic salmon. That is not what any country is discovering. The only way in which we can manage our fisheries other than according to present arrangements is to return to the old practice of bashing the fishermen over the head with a marlin spike because people took what they said was theirs.

That practice was all right when we had so much fish that we could all fish it, but now that we have so little and we have equipment that enables us to find fish so easily, we must operate in common. My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) has the advantage of representing a landlocked constituency. Unlike me, he is not subject to the daily influence of fishermen. He does the fishing industry a grave disservice by suggesting that there is an alternative way forward. We must make the system work. I want to suggest some tough measures to the Minister to make it work.

Mr. Gill: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gummer: I really must not. I have been asked to finish in time for the Minister to answer.

Will the Minister return to a policy that I reached and continued to pursue for the last three years of my time as fisheries Minister? Will he maintain the United Kingdom's opposition in principle to any kind of industrial fishing? Will he support the European Union in its desire to ensure that fish-meal is no longer used in a range of products for which it is clearly unsuitable when the requirements for fish rejuvenation are borne in mind?

Will the Minister recognise that, however tough the quotas and the total allowable catches may be, if they are all that the fish stocks can sustain, he needs to appeal to men and women of good will to support him in holding out for them? It is no longer any good saying, "We want a bit more ourselves, so we will give them a bit more." If that happens, in the end the figures just do not stand up.

Will the Minister press the EU to say in negotiations with countries beyond the Union, especially African countries, that no agreements to fish in their waters will be entertained without the EU paying for and running proper policing mechanisms? That will show that what we have promised to do, we will do and that what we have promised that we will not take, we will not take. It is no good asking Namibia, Togo or Senegal to police those fisheries. If we want to fish in their waters and zones, we must provide proper restrictions on our own fishermen and pay that cost; otherwise, we shall contribute to the unsustainability of their waters, as we already have to our own.

Mr. Gill: Will my right hon. Friend explain why, in answer to my previous question, he referred to the waters of Iceland and the British Isles as a common resource, whereas he is now talking about African countries having their own waters? He is getting his argument terribly confused.

Mr. Gummer: The fact is that we are part of the European Union and we have signed up to sharing the waters that we happen to have shared, in different ways, for many centuries. That is not true of Senegal, which does not have shared waters. Its geography means that it is a long way across the Atlantic before any other country is reached with which its waters could be shared. In addition, Senegal cannot exploit its waters within its sustainable commitments, so it properly makes use of its waters by doing deals with others who want to exploit them. Under those deals, others agree to certain restrictions and my point is that, although those restrictions cannot be properly policed by Senegal, they can be policed by the countries with which Senegal does those deals, and I want us, within the European Union, to set an example of doing so. I am sure my hon. Friend recognises the clear distinction between those two cases.

Next, I want the Minister to recognise that, in the end, we shall have to change the methods of control, away from those that encourage the discarding of fish, both juvenile and larger fish. My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow was right to say that the problem is not only one of juvenile fish being discarded.

We in Britain suffer significantly because we failed to carry through the days-at-sea measures that we should have taken. I have hard words for the Scottish nationalists, who are generally in favour of conservation, but who always vote against any particular conservation measure that they think might be electorally unpopular. Should the

[Mr. Gummer]

Scottish nationalists acquire more power—I understand that such an eventuality might arise in Scotland—I hope that they will act with greater responsibility. Scottish nationalism has done more than any other factor to stop the sort of conservation measures that we need. The nationalists constantly deploy in Scottish constituencies the argument that one can have conservation without any restriction on the activity of fishermen, but that is not possible.

I hope that the Minister accepts that we need a days-at-sea system. We have to introduce really tough measures and to insist that others carry those measures through when common stock is involved. My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow is right: my fishermen in Suffolk will not accept restrictions on their activities if the men of Lowestoft are not similarly restricted; likewise, the men of Lowestoft will not accept restrictions if the men of Holland, Scotland, Germany or any other place within the UK or the EU are not subject to the same restrictions and to the same policing.

In the past, the Minister has asked for practical measures. I want him to be prepared to go to the European Union to beef up the EU's inspection methods—to increase the powers and the number of the inspectors—and to insist that that is a matter of utmost importance. The previous Government agreed that we needed a common inspection system for a common resource. I believe that we need a stronger inspection system, one in which inspections can be made without notice being given, because it is no good telling people that inspectors are coming in three months' or two weeks' time to check that they are keeping the books properly.

If we are going to employ a days-at-sea system and other restrictions, those measures must be properly enforced throughout the European Union. I hope that the Minister will find the resources and the will to ensure that the EU is better able to police both its own resources and those of others which it agrees to take over.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) on his thoughtful and sensible speech. I confess that, when I saw the title of the debate, although the subject is a laudable one, my feelings were somewhat jaundiced by my previous experience of some of his colleagues on the Opposition Benches and my fear that some of them would attempt to use fisheries as a stick with which to beat the European Union. I am delighted that the debate has focused on the real and important issue of sustainability. I hope to address the hon. Gentleman's points and also those raised by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who, as he said, was a fisheries Minister. He knows that that is one of the most difficult briefs in Government and he is aware of the problems that go with the post. He has drawn on his knowledge to make several pertinent points, which I shall try to address in my response.

I accept absolutely that sustainability is the key to fisheries management not only in this country but in Europe and internationally. The hon. Gentleman referred to my relationship as a Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Minister with my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. He asked whether I would say different things if I were an Environment Minister. I assure him that I would say nothing different, as I believe that there is no contradiction involved in adopting an environmental position and caring about the entire marine ecology as part of a fisheries programme. If we do not have healthy seas, we will not have a sustainable fishing industry. Those two elements go together.

I work closely with my colleagues in the DETR and with those in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in relation to international sustainability. Only this week, I have discussed the problems of the over-exploitation of the Patagonian tooth fish and the threat to the wandering albatross caused by fishing methods and potentially unregulated international fishing. I take an interest in the international dimension and discuss such matters thoroughly. Important international forums include the intermediate ministerial conference—to which the hon. Gentleman referred—which comprises Environment Ministers. The United Nations agreement on straddling stocks involves the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Government strongly support its implementation internationally.

We are responsible for the sustainable management of our fish stocks, which we achieve through the common fisheries policy. Criticisms of that policy are well known to me, and I concede that it has great scope for improvement. As I have said before, we are seeking ways of securing that improvement. I accept also that several fish stocks in the North sea—indeed, in all our seas—are under threat and that some are seriously threatened. That is why, during the recent round of discussions on total allowable catches and quotas, we accepted that some quotas must be reduced because of the pressures on stocks. I shall return to that point in a moment.

The Government view the science issue seriously. The hon. Gentleman sought an assurance that the Government will support proper science and research in relation to fisheries protection. Last year, we committed £36.8 million to fisheries science in the areas of research and development and in monitoring and researching fish stocks. We are making considerable financial commitments to the industry.

As the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal kindly noted, I accepted the precautionary principle during this year's discussions at the Council of Ministers. The matter was raised in the intermediate ministerial meeting and, for the first time, the precautionary principle was taken to the Council of Ministers and the Fisheries Council and applied to the setting of TACs and quotas. I made it clear that I accepted the principle, which is not uncontroversial in the eyes of the industry. I also said that, although I believed that there was scope for discussion regarding the impact on the industry of cuts in fish stocks, I would take decisions on the basis of scientific advice. That is how we approached the negotiations in this year's round of discussions.

It is true that we mitigated the impact of the proposed cuts compared with the original proposals. That mitigation was based on advice that we received from our scientists through the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and what we believed that we could accept without endangering the stocks. Where we accepted that there were severe problems, we agreed to

substantial cuts in catches, which will be difficult for the industry. For example, as the hon. Member for Witney said, cod in the North sea will be reduced by 5 per cent. However, haddock will be reduced by 23 per cent. and whiting by 27 per cent. Those are significant cuts.

When I took over this brief in 1997, I made it clear to the industry that I was prepared to make and implement tough decisions that had been outstanding for some time, including decisions on enforcement, the problem of black fish and the overcapacity of our fishing fleet. Those were not easy decisions, and I cannot ignore their impact on our fishing fleet and our fishing communities. I have to take into account the consequences of those decisions, and I know that the hon. Member for Witney accepted that.

I emphasise that we came away from this year's negotiations with a balanced agreement. The balance was that we accepted the precautionary principle and the scientific claims that some stocks were over-exploited and under threat, and we took the necessary action. However, we also took into account the views of the fishing industry and examined the ways in which we could mitigate the effects of those cuts, for example, by finding alternative species that were available for the industry and ways of reducing the cuts. The industry understood that we achieved that balance.

We are taking a range of practical measures. First, if there are regulations, there must be enforcement. We have stepped up enforcement with, I believe, some success, particularly on black fish. We are making progress on that. The industry recognised that illegal landings and depressed prices do it no good. We have introduced designated ports and agreed to the satellite monitoring of larger vessels. Again, I cannot ignore the impact of those measures on the industry.

Mr. Gill: I remind the hon. Gentleman that, in an earlier debate, he agreed that the measures to which he has just referred, particularly the designated ports, will result in more dead, adult, saleable fish being dumped into the sea than before. We are tonight talking about conservation and we must come up with a better answer to those problems than more regulation, which is becoming an intolerable burden on an industry that is already over-regulated.

Mr. Morley: I do not recall saying exactly that. I shall deal with discards in a moment.

We have made progress with the multi-annual guidance programme. We have managed to match the capacity of most of the demersal fleet to the availability of fish stocks in line with our obligations under the MAGP. In areas where there is still overcapacity in relation to efforts in the pelagic and beam-trawl sectors, we have reached agreement with the industry about measures to reduce effort based on days at sea.

The difference between that measure and the scheme that was opposed by the previous Administration is that we gave the industry a choice in how it administered effort reduction. We wanted the industry to be involved in the management and implementation of effort reduction, which it has done in the pelagic and beam-trawl sectors. We made it clear that if the industry did not want to do that, the Ministry would have taken on the task. We preferred the industry to take on the measure, and we are glad that it is implementing it.

The hon. Member for Witney asked me for my views on marketing. I believe that there is a role for marketing and certification of the kind that the Marine Stewardship Council has proposed. That applies not only to fish, but to forestry products and even food products. Consumers are increasingly interested in such certification, and I view the MSC's actions with considerable interest and closely follow its actions. MAFF has a role in some trial areas such as black-water herring, where we have a particular interest in what the MSC is doing.

I have consistently stressed marketing and traceability to the industry, and said that sometimes it is necessary to concentrate not so much on quantity as on quality—fewer but better-quality fish can improve prices. Although the industry might land less fish, it would not necessarily lose out financially. In some cases, even when quotas are cut and fewer fish are landed, fishermen are compensated by the increased prices. Incidentally, we saw that happening last year and, indeed, running into 1999.

As for technical measures, we have supported the industry on things such as square-mesh panels, and we are looking at ways to manage the quota for the inshore fleet. We have underpinned the quota for sectors such as the mackerel handliners, which are low impact, in order to create a more sustainable fishery. We have banned such things as automatic grading machines, which waste fish at sea, and we have supported the V-notching of lobsters so that female lobsters in berry can be released and allowed to breed.

I have consistently made it clear that industrial fishing can have very undesirable consequences. In many cases, it is a waste of a very good resource; it can have an impact on commercial fish stocks by removing a food source; and, of course, it can affect marine mammals and sea birds, and, indeed, the whole ecology of the sea. That is why we have proposed seasonal closed areas running from the Orkney to the Humber, areas of the North sea in which industrial fishing will not take place. That will protect sea birds in particular, but has consequences for migrating salmon and sea trout. Spring-running salmon are under considerable threat. We intend to take this issue forward at the next Fisheries Council. We have also supported closed areas for bass stocks and the phasing out of drift nets because of their impact on not only marine mammals but a range of non-target species, including sharks.

I certainly do not agree that we are in danger of instituting over-conservation, but I can reassure the House about angling boats. MAFF has no proposals to limit the number of fish landed by angling boats. We are of course anxious to make sure that angling boats supposed to be for sport and recreation are used for sport and recreation, and are not landing fish for the commercial market. If we have evidence that that is not the case, we shall enforce sanctions rigorously. Fishermen and sea fish committees are anxious that we do that. However, we cannot ignore the impact of sports fishing. It is a large and important sector, and when we unfortunately have to close the channel cod fishery, as we did last year, we cannot exempt it. We are looking for measures to help the inshore fleet that will benefit the sports angling sector too.

I accept that fisheries science is not precise, but I must point out that, last year, the fishing industry agreed not to take the full recommended allocation of cod. It was a good year for cod, but the industry wanted to leave some cod to mature and thus allow stocks to increase for future

[Mr. Morley]

years. I do not think that that has been done before, and it is to be welcomed that the fishing industry itself is taking conservation and sustainability seriously and is working with us in the Ministry and with other groups to deal with it.

We have also put more species on quota because quotas are important to conserve stocks. Dogfish is the most recent species to have been agreed.

I want to make it clear, especially to the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), that a recent study of North sea cod fishery showed that 90 per cent. of discards were under-sized fish, not marketable fish. Although it is certainly true that some marketable fish are caught, which no one wants to happen, the majority of discards are under-sized fish. The answer lies in technical measures, in matching the capacity to fish stocks and in long-term sustainability. The proper way to reduce discards is proper management, proper enforcement and—I fully agree with the hon. Member for Witney—putting sustainability at the heart of all our fisheries policies.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 18 January 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Asylum Seekers

1. **Mr. David Prior** (North Norfolk): If he will make a statement on the action he is taking to reduce the number of bogus asylum seekers. [64345]

10. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): What measures he is taking to deal with the recent inflow of asylum seekers into the UK; and if he will make a statement. [64354]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): We are implementing the comprehensive integrated strategy for reform of immigration and asylum as set out in our recent White Paper. Fundamental to that strategy is a much faster system which protects genuine refugees but which deters abusive claimants. Legislation will be introduced shortly to help speed up the system and to tackle abuse.

Mr. Prior: Will the Home Secretary confirm that the number of people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom has risen by about 50 per cent. over the past two years?

Mr. Straw: The figure that the hon. Gentleman gives is correct. The principal reason for the increase is increased instability in parts of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia and of Somalia, which account for the vast majority of those who are awarded asylum status in the United Kingdom. Moreover, a comparison of our asylum figures, as a proportion of our population, with those for the rest of Europe shows that we are 11th out of 15 countries, and in absolute terms, many other European countries have many more applications for asylum and are less effective in dealing with them.

Sir Sydney Chapman: At the last Home Office Question Time, the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) announced that the number of adjudicators was being increased to deal with asylum-seeking cases. That is certainly welcome. Is it not a fact, however, that the numbers of staff within the immigration service are being reduced? If so, will the Home Secretary reconsider that reduction? Surely there is a need to increase the numbers of both staff and adjudicators to deal with the backlog of immigration and asylum cases.

Mr. Straw: As I discovered when I visited the Hatton Cross adjudication centre, under plans prepared by the previous Administration, the number of presenting officers—who are vital to processing asylum appeals—was to be decreased. I took action to ensure that the number of presenting officers was increased, and a large number of additional presenting officers are in the process of being appointed. A major programme of computerisation was set in hand by the previous Administration, which is bound to lead to some reduction in the number of clerical posts in the immigration and nationality directorate. However, under the comprehensive spending review, to make the system fairer, faster and firmer, we are increasing the overall resources devoted to immigration control.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): Does the Home Secretary agree that the Government have a case backlog because we inherited a backlog of 50,000 cases from the previous Government? Does he agree also that, for 18 years, the previous Government had no strategy for dealing with immigration and asylum cases? Does he further agree that one of the most effective ways in which the Government can tackle the issue is by ensuring that decisions are taken as speedily and as efficiently as possible in line with natural justice, so that everyone involved will be informed of the decisions? Is that not the way to cut the backlog?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The previous Administration's rhetoric was entirely belied by their practice. We are aiming, as we said in the White Paper that I published in July, to secure a situation in which initial decisions are made within two months, and appeals are disposed of within four months. Achieving that goal of course depends on our getting the new arrangements and the legislation in place.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): As Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia have achieved the status of, and are recognised as, democratic states with sound judicial systems, cannot applicants for refugee status who have either travelled through or claimed refugee status in relation to those countries be treated in the same way as applicants coming from Berlin, France or Brussels, in relation to whom the presumption is that, as democracy and the judicial system are safe in those places, their applications should be refused? Should not applicants who have touched base with the countries to which I referred request asylum there?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and the immigration service has had considerable success in ensuring that people who have come from such countries seeking asylum are returned whenever it is possible. We have also made increased use of the powers of detention. However, we have not been assisted by the terms of the Dublin convention—which was signed up to by the previous Administration, in a moment of madness, in 1990—in securing the return of asylum seekers who have come through European Union countries. The convention

came into force in October 1997 and has made it increasingly difficult for us to enforce the return of asylum seekers to the European Union.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): On the measures to combat illegal immigration, may I remind the Home Secretary of the severe measures that he is proposing against United Kingdom freight transport operators? Is it not a fact that the illegal organisations exploiting that trade are becoming ever more professional in breaking into sealed containers transported by road? Does he agree with the Freight Transport Association that the Government should exert more pressure in ensuring security at the borders of other European countries, and pay particular attention to what is recognised to be very lax security in the port of Calais?

Mr. Straw: Here we have a perfect example of the Conservatives' rhetoric on asylum seekers being belied by their practice and their subscription to clients such as the Freight Transport Association. Of course we accept the need for greater security at Calais. We are taking positive action on that with Jean-Pierre Chevenement, the French Minister of the Interior. Before we listen to the Conservatives' apologies for the Freight Transport Association, let us be clear that in many cases hauliers knowingly or negligently allow their lorries to be used for the transportation of illegal immigrants. We shall crack down on that, just as the previous Administration cracked down on civil aviation carriers.

Immigration Advisers

2. **Maria Eagle** (Liverpool, Garston): What plans he has to regulate immigration advisers. [64346]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Government have a manifesto commitment to control unscrupulous immigration advisers. We intend to implement it and will include provisions in a new asylum and immigration Bill in a few weeks' time.

Maria Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Some welcome action is imminent, which can only be good. As one hears ever more lurid stories of so-called immigration advisers indulging in what can only be described as sometimes criminal behaviour, does he agree that it is vital that those who are entitled to immigration advice should be able to rely on its accuracy and on the integrity of those providing it? Will he ensure that those who seek advice about their immigration status can rely on its quality; that, wherever malpractice is found—in solicitors offices or other organisations that purport to be able to give legal advice—it will be dealt with; and that there will be a crackdown on advisers who do little more than make money out of the vulnerable?

Mr. O'Brien: The activities of unscrupulous advisers are a major scandal that must be dealt with firmly and comprehensively. We shall introduce the necessary measures in legislation during this Session. We have already created a dedicated unit in the immigration and nationality directorate to investigate advisers who may be abusing our current immigration laws. The previous Administration did nothing, but we shall take the necessary action.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): How can the hon. Gentleman possibly take on the regulation of the so-called advisers when his right hon. Friend the Home Secretary admitted only moments ago that the number of employees in the immigration service was being reduced?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman seems not to have heard my right hon. Friend clearly. There has been a movement towards computerisation of the IND, which may affect some clerical staff. However, the extra money that we shall be able to direct towards immigration control and the effective control of the asylum system as a result of the comprehensive spending review will enable us to target resources on having the employees that we need where we need them so that we can deliver effective immigration controls and an asylum system that works, which the previous Administration failed to deliver.

Personality Disorders

3. **Mr. David Hinchliffe** (Wakefield): What proposals he has to consult with ministerial colleagues in the Department of Health on introducing legislation relating to individuals with personality disorders. [64347]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Extensive consultation preceded the publication on 8 December by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health of the Government strategy, "Modernising Mental Health Services". That document explains that the Government are considering proposals to create

"a new form of reviewable detention for those people with a severe personality disorder who are considered to pose a grave risk to the public."

Mr. Hinchliffe: Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government recognise that under existing law it is not possible to detain for treatment patients who are deemed untreatable under the Mental Health (Amendment) Act 1983? Will he assure me that the Government will not put pressure on the medical profession to detain for treatment people whom it deems untreatable? Will he set out the Government's thinking on resolving a gap in the law that has existed since the passage of the Mental Health Act 1959, more than 40 years ago, and say how the Government will act on this difficult matter?

Mr. Straw: Whether a patient comes within the terms of the Mental Health (Amendment) Act 1983 is a matter for the medical practitioners concerned, not for Ministers.

We are entering into a dialogue with the psychiatric profession because, as I have indicated in earlier parliamentary replies, the practice has varied over time and between different forensic psychiatrists. I had a meeting about exactly that matter last week with the president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and we will continue that dialogue. It is my view, and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, that the concept of untreatability is fundamentally antithetical

to the whole philosophy of western science, as it tries to set in stone whether or not a particular patient is capable of treatment.

As to the future, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has made it clear that alongside prison for those who are subject to a serious personality disorder and who commit offences, and hospital for those who are categorisable at the moment under the Mental Health Acts, we need a third approach, under which those who are suffering from severe personality disorders and who pose a grave risk to the public can be kept in securer conditions as long as they continue to pose that risk. There they may have treatment, if such treatment can be identified.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Following the question from the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), I am pleased to hear that the Home Secretary is now having dialogue with the leader of the psychiatrists after his somewhat sharp remarks about them in this place not so long ago. The National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders report recommended a separate establishment, outside the health and prison institutions, for those with severe mental illness, and that was very much the recommendation of the Fallon report last week. That is an extremely costly proposal. In the meantime, the danger is that those complex, difficult and dangerous individuals will be shunted between health and prison institutions without practical action. What timetable can the Home Secretary offer us?

Mr. Straw: I agree with the right hon. Lady that this a complex matter. Although they are relatively few in number, those individuals pose great problems for the professions concerned—but, above all, they pose a serious risk to the public if they are left at large. We are working as quickly as we can on the development of the third service. To keep costs down, we are looking at ways in which the Prison Service and the secure hospitals can be used for part of the provision. I am sorry that I cannot give a precise date for implementation, but we are proceeding determinedly against a background where the original proposal for such provision was made in 1975, in the Butler report.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Is the Home Secretary aware that a few very dangerous people—who used to be known as psychopaths—will be released from prison eventually, unless a psychiatrist certifies that their condition could be alleviated, or prevented from deteriorating, by treatment? It is no use castigating psychiatrists, and asserting—as the Secretary of State for Health did last week—that they are refusing to certify simply so that they can avoid having to treat those people, when to make such a certification would be in defiance of the Mental Health Act 1959. Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that, however fruitful his discussions are, there is a gap in the law that will have to be dealt with?

Mr. Straw: We are dealing with the matter, but I happen to believe that the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health were entirely justified. Moreover, a recent decision by the House of Lords Judicial Committee in the case of Reid made it clear that the current definition of treatability does not just include whether a potential patient is treatable by the medical profession, but can include whether, for example, they are susceptible to sex offender treatment programmes run by the Prison Service or to treatment by psychological and therapeutic services. I say again that we already know that the practice of medical practitioners in this field varies considerably. That justifies hon. Members on both sides of the House who are faced with a seriously disturbed offender—who, without almost any doubt, is likely to commit further offences—saying to the relevant medical practitioners, "Are you absolutely certain, within the law as it has been defined extensively by the courts, that this individual is not susceptible to any treatment of any kind?" That must be the question before such people are let out at large.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): The Home Secretary is right, but is there not a very wide range of individuals with personality disorders? Some disorders are much milder and are treatable. If we are serious about reducing the prison population, we must take on board the fact that some people with a personality disorder that could and should have been treated need never have ended up in prison. If there is a scandal in this, it is the fact that so many young people who go out of the control of the Department of Health because of age are left with no one to care for them. It is scandalous that some psychiatrists say that they are not treatable, when the majority view is that they are.

The Home Secretary knows of my great interest in this issue. Will he press his colleagues in the Department of Health to introduce mental health reform legislation at the earliest opportunity? The Minister of State may shake his head, but there is some talk about the next Queen's Speech and the matter is urgent. I hope that mental health reform measures would command the full consensus of the House.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I know of his great interest in this subject. I am sure that most Members of Parliament would subscribe to his views about mentally disordered prisoners who do not pose a serious risk to the public and could more appropriately be treated in the mental health system.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has made clear to the House the importance that he attaches to introducing legislation. For reasons that the hon. Gentleman will fully understand, I cannot make any promises about when that will be. My right hon. Friend has already published the fact that he is investing an extra £700 million in mental health services over the next three years, not least to tackle the problem that the hon. Gentleman identified.

Car Crime

4. **Mr. Andrew Reed** (Loughborough): When he last met representatives from the car industry to discuss measures to reduce car crime. [64348]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): I met the vehicle crime reduction action team, on which the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders and the Retail Motor Industry Federation are represented, on 17 November 1998. I discussed the initiatives that they

are driving forward to achieve a 30 per cent. reduction in vehicle crime over the next five years—a target announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 29 September 1998.

Mr. Reed: As someone who has been the victim of car crime five times in the past four years, I can sympathise with the hundreds of thousands who have suffered. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a general perception that the motor industry has not taken the issue seriously enough? What specific measures has he asked the industry to take to assist in that 30 per cent. reduction in crime, which we would all welcome?

Mr. Boateng: Vehicle crime of the kind of which my hon. Friend has, sadly, been the victim, accounts for losses of about £3 billion a year and is a really serious problem. I am glad to say that we are now working in close partnership with the motor industry, not least in relation to design and structural issues about the glazing of the side and rear of motor vehicles, where modifications can make it that much more difficult for the criminal to get in, and in relation to the retail trade and the problem of secondhand cars, because secondhand cars are more likely to be the target of vehicle crime than those that are bought new, which may account for my hon. Friend's difficulty. There are lessons for all of us, and we are working in partnership with the motor industry to ensure that we learn them.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Many people who commit car crimes do so to fund their drug habit. Will the Minister bear in mind the activities of Rotary throughout this country in seeking to educate young people away from drug abuse and crime, and ensure that his colleagues in the Home Office join Rotary in promoting that excellent initiative?

Mr. Boateng: I warmly welcome the hon. and learned Gentleman's reference to the contribution that the voluntary sector can make in partnerships that are designed to reduce the impact of drugs in our society. The Government, in partnership with the voluntary sector and with health authorities throughout the country, are spending an additional £217 million on the problem. It is of great assistance to have that Government intervention supplemented by the activities of organisations such as Rotary. Such partnerships are the best way to combat crime and its causes, and Rotary and other organisations are to be congratulated on their contribution.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (Knowsley, South): Is my hon. Friend aware that, on Merseyside, car crime and other forms of serious crime are at their lowest levels for 18 years? Will he therefore join me in condemning the BBC 2 documentary programme "Mersey Blues", which last Wednesday described crime as a career choice on Merseyside? Does he not agree that such cheap remarks are an insult to the people of Merseyside, that they do an injustice to the Merseyside police and that they undermine those of us who are trying to regenerate the area by attracting inward investment?

Mr. Boateng: The fearfulness and alarm that can be generated by programmes such as the one that my hon. Friend has described give rise to concern, not least on Merseyside. Recently, I met the chief constable and the chair of the police authority there, and I know that they believe that the programme does not represent the reality of policing on Merseyside. I am glad to endorse the product of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998: it has led to some very effective partnerships in the area which are reducing crime. All those engaged in those partnerships prove once more how valuable they are in preventing and reducing crime.

Police (Early Retirement)

5. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): Which police authority has the *(a)* highest and *(b)* lowest rate of early retirement through sickness. [64349]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kate Hoey): In 1997–98, Derbyshire constabulary had the highest rate of ill-health retirement among police forces in England and Wales, at 65 per cent. of all retirements. Surrey police had the lowest such rate, at 14 per cent. of all retirements.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. May I commend to her the work of the police force in Harrow, and especially of those officers working out of Pinner police station in my constituency, with whom I was able to go out on the beat on Friday?

Does my hon. Friend agree that continued efforts to increase efficiency by police authorities are essential if we are to get the best use out of the police service's resources in the battle against crime? Does she accept that further measures are needed to reduce the number of costly early retirements as a result of sickness?

Kate Hoey: I am glad that my hon. Friend went out with his local police. It is important for Members of Parliament to do that and thereby learn what is going on in their areas. Clearly, more efficiency is needed, especially with regard to sickness in the police force, although there has been some improvement: for example, the early retirement rate as a result of sickness has fallen on Merseyside from 77 per cent. to 54 per cent, and in Cleveland, from 58 per cent. to 32 per cent. However, police authorities, chief constables and the public know that that is still not good enough. More has to be done to ensure that fewer police officers retire early.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the attempts by the North Yorkshire police to boost morale in an area where the early retirement rates are unacceptably high? Given that background, will the Minister join me in putting pressure on the Minister for Local Government and Housing to give a more generous standard spending assessment to North Yorkshire police? Under this year's settlement, the force will not be able both to meet last year's pay awards and to install the more expensive radio system that is vital in such a sparsely populated rural area. The North Yorkshire force also intends to raise manning levels to cope with the millennium celebrations: will the Minister come to our aid?

Kate Hoey: I should have mentioned the North Yorkshire force in my previous answer, as its retirement rate from sickness shows one of the best improvements in the country, having fallen from 76 per cent. to 49 per cent.

On the question of the settlement, it is a fair settlement at a time of general constraint on public spending. All police forces will have to consider the efficiency and value for money exercises in which some forces are already doing extremely well. The police have been asked to make efficiency savings of 2 per cent. in the coming year, and the savings can then be invested in front-line policing. If North Yorkshire police get their sickness level down even further, more police will be out there, on the beat, at the front line, dealing with the public.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): How confident is my hon. Friend that early retirement is not used as an excuse by incompetent or corrupt police officers to avoid the proper disciplinary process? What plans has she to address that issue in the wake of the bungled murder inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence case?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend would not expect me to make any comment on the particular case to which he refers, which involved an ordinary, not a medical, retirement. However, the issue is one that causes great concern both to the public and to the police and we look forward to the report of the Lawrence inquiry, from which might come suggestions that we shall be able to take up. It is clear that the public will not accept police officers who face disciplinary proceedings being able to avoid normal procedures, and we shall ensure that anything that can be done is done. Changes already made to the disciplinary code and police regulations will take effect on 1 April.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): How does the Minister account for the fact that my local police force in Sussex has suffered the second-largest fall in the number of on-duty police officers of any force in the country since May 1997 at a time when police resources are greatly stretched by the legislation emanating from her Department? Will she try to put that down to early retirements, or is it, in fact, another example of the Labour Government's actions in office failing to match up to their pre-election rhetoric about being tough on crime??

Kate Hoey: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the police settlement for the past two years was made by the previous Government; it has nothing to do with the Labour Government. The settlement is fair and those police forces that are careful about how they spend their money will be able to ensure that the public are policed properly.

International Crime

6. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): What recent discussions he has held with his European counterparts on reducing serious international crime. [64350]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kate Hoey): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I discussed co-operation in reducing international crime with our European Union counterparts at the meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 3 December. International crime issues have also formed part of the agenda for meetings that my right hon. Friend and I have had in the past three months with the German Ministers of the Interior and of Justice, the Austrian Minister of the Interior and the French Minister of Justice, and for the meetings that I had with the Hungarian Ministers of the Interior and of Justice during my visit to Budapest in December.

Mr. Cunningham: What discussions has my hon. Friend held with the French Minister of the Interior about the high level of smuggling of cigarettes, beer, spirits and drugs? Such smuggling can cause harm in my constituency in Coventry, with many off-licences and newsagents being badly affected.

Kate Hoey: As my hon. Friend may know, although the French Minister of the Interior is now back at work, he has been ill for the past few months, during which time on-going discussions were held with his officials. My hon. Friend is right to point out the problems of alcohol and tobacco smuggling: that is a serious criminal activity, which robs decent, honest taxpayers. We are doing more to tackle the problem and Her Majesty's Customs and Excise is implementing tougher policies and better targeting. Those efforts are beginning to work and we shall continue to work closely with the French Government.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Does the Minister agree that the organisation of illegal immigration is one of the most serious aspects of international crime within Europe? In that context, will she or her right hon. Friend the Home Secretary hold discussions with European Justice Ministers to ensure that each EU member country deals properly with bogus asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, and that they are dealt with in the first country they reach? If Her Majesty's Government cannot reach an accord on that matter, will the Home Secretary tear up the Dublin convention, which he so rightly criticised?

Kate Hoey: It is a pity that the hon. Gentleman did not make those views clear before the previous Government signed the Dublin convention. However, I agree that the problem of gangs organising illegal immigration is very serious. The matter is discussed continually by our European partners and by the accession countries because it is not simply a European Union issue: it affects all of Europe. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), has just returned from a visit to Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia during which precisely those sorts of issues were discussed. It is a serious problem,which we must tackle at source.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I declare an interest as a practising lawyer. Does the Minister accept that one of the best ways of curbing the smuggling of loose tobacco which is used in hand-rolled cigarettes would be to persuade the Belgian authorities—the Antwerp warehouses supply 70 per cent. of the rolled

tobacco available in the United Kingdom—to allow the extradition of Belgian citizens to stand trial on conspiracy charges before the British courts?

Kate Hoey: In his usual way, my hon. Friend has made an important point that we shall examine and pursue. We shall clearly do anything that we can to prevent the smuggling of alcohol and tobacco.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): In relation to international co-operation, the Minister will be more than familiar with the recent success of the Garda Siochana in intercepting a huge consignment of drugs headed for Northern Ireland, with which were included 16 machine pistols and silencers. Does she recognise that, if there is a diminution in the level of terrorism in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain, the infrastructural and logistical capability will be filled by international terrorists who are involved in the drugs trade? Will the Home Department pay particular attention to encouraging police constabularies in Great Britain to co-operate even more than at present on a day-to-day basis with the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Garda Siochana on that issue?

Kate Hoey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that timely question. It is important to recall the amount of drugs seized and to congratulate the Garda and the RUC on their continued co-operation, which is very good at present. We must obviously extend and improve co-operation within the rest of the United Kingdom, and that is already happening. Terrorism affects everyone and may be a by-product of other organised crime.

Owen Oyston

7. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): If he will discuss with the chief constable of Manchester the availability of information on the investigation of accusations of rape in the case of Owen Oyston. [64351]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I am afraid that I cannot accede to my hon. Friend's request. The disclosure of information about an investigation is a matter for the chief officer of the police force concerned. Ministers have no authority to intervene in such matters, nor would it be appropriate for us to do so.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My right hon. Friend will be aware that many people in the north-west of England believe that Owen Oyston is innocent of the crime of rape and that his trials were a travesty of justice. He will know also that Mr. Oyston has refused to concede any element of guilt in this case, even though he might secure early parole. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that all the documents in the possession of Manchester police—including the many documents that were not given to the defence, and particularly all of those relating to Cullis—will be handed to the Criminal Cases Review Commission immediately? Is it not quite wrong that this man—who many people, including me, believe is innocent of this crime—should languish in prison simply because the CCRC does not have the necessary resources to conduct an earlier inquiry?

Mr. Straw: It is not for me or any Minister to give the undertakings that my hon. Friend requests. Mr. Owen Oyston was convicted by a jury on serious charges and made an appeal to the Court of Appeal criminal division, which was dismissed. I now understand that he has made an application to the CCRC. What transpires is entirely a matter for that commission, not for Ministers.

Young Offenders

8. **Mrs. Sylvia Heal** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): When he expects to achieve his target of halving the time between an offence being committed and the young offender appearing in court. [64352]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): In 1996, the average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders was 142 days. We are committed to halving that time in this Parliament. On coming to office, we took early action to begin the process of change. There are now more than 150 fast-track schemes in operation covering almost half of all courts in England and Wales. Provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 were brought into force on 30 September last year to enable the courts to manage cases more quickly and efficiently. Other measures are currently being piloted with national implementation planned for October this year. The Government have set demanding performance targets for all stages of proceedings up to and after trial and for all youth justice agencies.

Mrs. Heal: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. Does he agree that justice delayed is justice denied and that victims, in particular, will welcome the Government's efforts to eliminate any delay in the criminal justice system? Halesowen and Warley magistrates courts, which cover my constituency, operate fast-track schemes and early administrative hearings, so that the first hearing takes place within four days. The clerk at Warley magistrates court has told me, however, that sometimes there are delays if subsequent hearings are required because other agencies involved have difficulty in meeting the court's timetable. Is my hon. Friend having discussions with all agencies connected with youth justice?

Mr. Boateng: I have visited Warley magistrates court and I know how seriously its staff take their duties, not least to the victims of crime, who particularly suffer as a result of delay. The sort of delays that have occurred in the past, particularly in the implementation of youth justice, have a very damaging effect on our capacity to make young people understand what the consequences of their offending will be for themselves and the victims of crime. We are therefore right to set those demanding and challenging targets.

Bearing in mind Warley's experience, it is worth while contrasting the 150 fast-track schemes that are now operating with the eight that existed when we took office. That is the difference between new Labour in action and Conservative rhetoric, and it is worth pointing it out.

There is a responsibility to make sure that all agencies work as partners in this endeavour, which is why we are working closely with the Department of Health and all other relevant Departments to ensure that education and social services reports are presented in good time and cases can be dispatched fairly, efficiently and, above all, rapidly.

Electoral Reform

11. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What plans he has to implement the recommendations of the independent commission on the voting system. [64355]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): We made it clear in our manifesto that implementation of the recommendations of the independent commission on the voting system would require the endorsement of those recommendations by the people of this country in a referendum, and that remains the position.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the Home Secretary for that reply. Why should we give up the British electoral system, which is the most widely used in the world—it is used in 62 countries and by 49 per cent. of the world's electors—in favour of the dog's breakfast served up by the noble Lord Jenkins, which has never been tried anywhere in the world? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that when, as long ago as 1974, the then Labour Cabinet rejected Lord Jenkins's first paper recommending electoral reform, it demonstrated a wisdom that he would be well advised to follow 25 years later?

Mr. Straw: Some people take the hon. Gentleman's view; others take a different one. There is one thing of which I am clear: any change to the electoral system should have the full support of the British population in a referendum. It is of course a matter for the British people whether they wish to stick with the current system.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Before my right hon. Friend allows his colleagues to blunder into the incompetent system suggested by Lord Jenkins, who proved conclusively that he could not even run a political party, will he show sufficient confidence in the British electorate's ability to study carefully the selection procedures for and elections to the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament and, only after those arrangements have had sufficient time to run, put to the British people the suggestion that even this Government can occasionally make mistakes?

Mr. Straw: I entirely subscribe to my hon. Friend's final proposition—as was said to Jack Lemmon in the last line of "Some Like it Hot", "Nobody's perfect." That certainly includes the present Home Secretary. There is a case for seeing how the new systems of proportional representation for elections to the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and, indeed, the European Parliament, fall into place before proceeding with the referendum. We shall take those findings into account.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Will the Home Secretary confirm that his view of electoral systems could be described as horses for courses, as he has said previously? Will he confirm, to echo the debate on the euro, that, while the Conservatives say that they want no change and my party is committed to change, the Government's position is to consider the national interest in deciding whether to change? Will he therefore also confirm that it remains his Government's opinion that it is in the national interest that a referendum of the British people should decide the matter?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It goes without saying that we speak and decide things only in the national interest. We have always been committed to a referendum. Which recommendations Ministers and Members of Parliament make to the electorate remain to be seen. Let us be absolutely clear: the decision on future voting systems for Westminster is not in the hands or the pockets of any Minister or Member of Parliament. It is for the British people to decide. I am quite sure that, when it comes to it, there will be a vigorous and open debate on the issue.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Jenkins proposals would allot a disproportionate share of the say to minority parties and that that is not an acceptable way forward? Is not it a fact that, if we accept the Jenkins fudge, between 15 and 20 per cent. the incumbents of parliamentary seats would not be directly elected?

Mr. Straw: It is patent that that could be a consequence. During the debate on the Jenkins report, I pointed out some of the questions that still remain about its recommendations. The Jenkins commission felt that the current system produced a lack of proportionality. If one examines its subsequent proposals, however, one might consider that the fact that the Conservative party's position—this is not a partisan point—will remain the same suggests that the committee's recommendations are not robust on proportionality, if on anything else.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Contrary to what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) has said, does the Home Secretary remember that, when he was in opposition, he wrote an article for *The Times*, in which he said:

> "Proportional representation is not a matter of morality but crude party advantage—which is why the Liberals only adopted the idea in 1922, when their decline really began"?

Before congratulating the Home Secretary on those words, may I check that he stands by them?

Mr. Straw: Of course I remember the article. It is one of a series that I used to write for *The Times*, and which I much enjoyed writing. It might be to the advantage of the House if I were to publish my extensive collected works on first past the post. I believe that the position that I have taken on the subject is no secret.

Vulnerable Youths (Criminal Activity)

12. **Mr. Chris Mullin** (Sunderland, South): What plans he has to expand provision for diverting vulnerable youths away from criminal activity; and if he will make a statement. [64356]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): We are pursuing a wide-ranging programme to reform and speed up the youth justice system and to divert vulnerable young people away from crime. We are currently piloting a range of new measures stemming from the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, including the final

warning scheme, the child safety order and the parenting order, all of which are designed to help ensure early action when children and young people first offend or are at risk of offending.

Mr. Mullin: I am not talking of the measures under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; I am talking about some of the very good schemes—such as one running in the Home Secretary's constituency—designed to provide young people who live in areas vulnerable to crime with constructive activities to prevent their involvement in crime in the first place. I want to be sure that that issue is now being taken seriously in the Home Office; that did not happen under the previous Government. Such an approach requires co-ordination with other Departments that have a part to play—such as the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr. Boateng: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. The results of the scheme to which he refers, youth works, have been laudable, and that scheme is an example of the good practice that we want to be spread across the country. As my hon. Friend must be aware, we have established the Youth Justice Board, which has responsibility for developing similar initiatives. We have underpinned its work with more than £80 million so that progress may be made on that agenda. That is good news for young people and for society. We are determined to deliver on the agenda that includes effective diversion from crime.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): I congratulate the Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), on his question.

What is happening about being tough on the causes of crime? What evidence is there that the Home Department is in discussion with other Departments to ensure that we have effective measures to prevent crime being committed in the first place?

Mr. Boateng: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes an interest in this matter and he knows that we are working on the issue not only with the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—with which we are making progress on a range of projects as a result of research and funding—but, importantly, with the Department of Health. As a result of the partnerships that are being established pursuant to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the youth offender teams, for the first time the Department of Health has an input at local level, through local health authorities and trusts. Evidence has shown that early intervention works, and we believe that our new investment in such schemes will deliver rich dividends.

Police (Sickness)

13. **Mr. Tony McNulty** (Harrow, East): Which police authority had *(a)* the highest and *(b)* the lowest level of absence through sickness in the last year for which figures are available. [64358]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kate Hoey): The latest figures available are for 1997–98. The highest level was in South Wales, where the average figure per officer was 17.39 days per annum, and the lowest was in Wiltshire, at 8.76 days.

Mr. McNulty: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Although I accept that the overwhelming number of sickness absences in our police forces are genuine, can she assure me that, where there is evidence of abuse, it will be dealt with firmly—not ignored or swept under the carpet—and that the perpetrators will not be retired without facing disciplinary action?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is right. We are taking the matter seriously. He will be aware that Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary recently published its report, "Lost Time", which highlighted sickness levels in the police last year. We obviously cannot allow such levels to continue without tackling them effectively. Sickness absence costs between £210 million and £250 million a year; we must all work to reduce that.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Obviously, greater efficiency is important, but will the Minister confirm that last year, there were more than 13,000 assaults against individual policemen and policewomen, and that Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary reported that the amount of time lost through sickness because of assault was "remarkably low"? Would it not be a grave mistake, therefore, if we failed to recognise the exceptional devotion to duty of the vast majority of members of the police service in this country?

Kate Hoey: The right hon. Gentleman's remarks show that there is no relationship between inputs and outputs. Clearly, some members of the police force will have to leave because of the assaults that they have suffered, or the stress of the job and all the difficulties that being a police officer entails, but there is no reason why sickness levels in certain parts of the country cannot be brought down. I hope that we would have support from across the Chamber for all the measures that can be taken to do that. It should not be seen as a party political issue.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that there are many stressful occupations? Teachers and many others have a stressful life. The police force is in a privileged position: its members have a shorter career term than most other professions—on average, 30 years. Although we have great respect for our police force, it is a matter of concern if there are high rates of sickness and of early retirement through sickness, especially if that retirement is used to evade scrutiny and the proper procedures of police security.

Kate Hoey: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend said, particularly about the levels of stress associated with other jobs. Answering questions in the House is sometimes rather stressful. My hon. Friend's comments underline the need for us all to work together to reduce sickness levels. Police officers should not be allowed to make sickness an excuse for avoiding disciplinary measures, and we will make sure that that does not happen.

Young Offenders

14. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): When he expects to end the practice of holding 15 and 16-year-olds in adult prisons. [64359]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): I hope that we can all agree that juveniles in custody on remand or under sentence should be held in facilities appropriate to their needs. The Government intend to start work during 1999 to establish a distinct estate within the Prison Service for 15-to-17-year-old boys remanded or sentenced to custody, and to improve the care and regimes delivered within it. An assessment is already under way of the needs of young women under the age of 18.

Dr. Lewis: Does the Minister recall that when his party was in opposition, its shadow Home Affairs team, led by our present Prime Minister, repeatedly castigated as inadequate the Conservative programme for providing no fewer than 170 secure local authority places, and that the present Prime Minister said that the problem could be solved "without delay"? Does the Minister realise that the admission from his Department, in response to repeated questioning from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), that the present Government have provided only six extra places since they came into office shows that the Labour party says one thing in opposition and produces a heck of a lot less in government?

Mr. Howarth: No. The hon. Gentleman should take a little more time to reflect on what the Government whom he supported achieved over 18 years. In just 20 short months we have started to deal with a problem that has been festering for many years. The hon. Gentleman should judge us on what we achieve over the term of this Government. At the end of that period, proper arrangements will be in place to deal with juvenile offenders in a way that would not have entered the imagination of our predecessors, the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported. He should be ashamed of their record. We are putting right the wrongs that they perpetrated.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Is not the Minister overlooking the words of the Prime Minister when he was shadow Home Affairs spokesman, when he said that the places in local authority secure accommodation could be provided "without delay", and when he said that

"This country does not want to wait years before the problem is dealt with"?—[*Official Report*, 11 January 1994; Vol. 235, c. 40.]

The Labour Government have provided only six places. Are not the Government welshing on what they said in opposition, when they undertook to deal with the matter by providing more places in local authority secure accommodation? Now they say that the 15 and 16-year-olds should be held in part of the prison estate. Are they not reneging on commitments given by the Prime Minister in opposition?

Mr. Howarth: I find that outrageous. The hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the previous Government and they did nothing about the growing problem of how to deal with juveniles. Conservative Members criticise our spending plans, and when we decide to do something about problems by spending money on them they criticise us for doing so. They should hang their heads in shame for the mess that they made of dealing with juvenile crime and the juvenile criminal justice system. For the hon. Gentleman to lecture the Government from the Dispatch Box is laughable.

Kosovo

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on recent tragic events in Kosovo.

On Saturday we received reports of a massacre at Racak, south of Pristina. General Drewienkiewicz, the leader of the British team in the Kosovo verification mission, visited the site on Saturday, and I spoke to him that afternoon. General Drewienkiewicz reported that the bodies he saw had mostly been shot in the head or neck in what looked like an execution. Those who had been killed appeared to be of all ages, including grey-haired old men. None of the bodies he saw were wearing uniform. He saw no evidence of fighting, such as spent shell cases.

It is simply not credible that those who were killed were the casualties of a military conflict. The eye-witness accounts of international observers make it only too clear that they were murdered. In any common-sense understanding of the term, this was a war crime. The past decade of ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia is all too full of such atrocities. Nevertheless, however hardened we are by familiarity to such scenes, every hon. Member must have been shocked and repelled by the cold and calculated character of this massacre. Several thousand civilians have since been reported to have fled the area. We once again face a potential humanitarian crisis as the result of Serb repression within Kosovo.

Yesterday I spoke with the German, French and Italian Foreign Ministers. I obtained their agreement that our four ambassadors in Belgrade should formally lodge a joint demarche demanding that the officers of the army and police units in Racak last Friday must immediately be removed from duty while these murders are investigated. We also insisted that the International War Crimes Tribunal must be allowed to carry out an investigation in Kosovo.

Last Wednesday I visited the tribunal in The Hague and met Judge Arbour, the chief prosecutor. Both she and Judge MacDonald, the president of the tribunal, expressed warm appreciation of the strong support that the Government have provided to the tribunal in terms of funds, personnel and political commitment. At the time, I repeated our support for the demand of the tribunal for access to Kosovo. Earlier this afternoon, Judge Arbour attempted to cross the border into Kosovo, but was turned back by Serb border forces. Later today, the Security Council will meet in emergency session to consider the events in Kosovo. The British representative will demand that the Security Council makes clear its support for the tribunal—which was set up on the authority of the United Nations—and insists that the tribunal must be allowed access to Kosovo.

If we are to establish peace and stability in Kosovo, it is vital that we escape from the relentless cycle of ethnic atrocity followed by reprisal. Those individuals who are responsible for such murders must personally be brought to justice. That would be the most fitting response to this atrocity, but it would also send a strong message to all officers serving in Kosovo that they will be held to account for any offence that they commit against humanitarian law.

I salute the courage and the commitment of the members of the Kosovo verification mission. They operate in circumstances of real risk, as was demonstrated when a British member of the team was shot at and injured last week. I am pleased to tell the House that he is making a good recovery.

The Kosovo verification mission has made a real contribution to stability in Kosovo, in particular by brokering local ceasefires and negotiating refugee returns. The public attacks on it in Belgrade this weekend seem to forget that only last week the verification mission was instrumental in securing the release of eight Serb hostages. However, the verification mission can succeed only on the basis of the co-operation to which President Milosevic committed Belgrade in the Holbrooke package. We therefore deplore the fact that yesterday Serb security forces entered Racak against representations by the verification mission, and opened fire on the village despite the presence in it of verifiers. We have already protested in Belgrade about that event, and tomorrow Generals Clark and Naumann will be demanding full co-operation with the verification mission.

Those who led the massacre in Racak must bear full responsibility for their actions. Nevertheless, all those who have contributed to the political stalemate in Kosovo must bear their share of responsibility for creating the climate in which the ceasefire has crumbled. The Holbrooke package at the end of last year provided Kosovo with the prospect of real autonomy, including control of its local police force and free and fair elections supervised by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. It offered Serbia the opportunity to withdraw from an armed conflict that undermines its economy and isolates it in the world.

A detailed paper has since been produced by the special representatives of the United States and the European Union. It proposes a three-year period in which Kosovo can develop its own autonomous assembly and democratic local communes. That interim period would be followed by a review of the final status of Kosovo. I deeply regret that, three months further on, meaningful talks on that paper have not begun. The fault for that lies on both sides. Despite intensive pressure and repeated mediation, it still has not been possible to get agreement even on the composition of the Kosovo negotiating team. The main obstacle has been the refusal of the Kosovo Liberation Army to take part in any team that includes Dr. Rugova, the elected leader of the Kosovo Albanians.

Over the weekend, I discussed with Madeleine Albright and other colleagues within the Contact Group how we can restore momentum to the political process. We are proposing an early meeting of the Contact Group at the level of political directors, which the United Kingdom will chair.

We have also agreed on the key messages to both sides in this conflict. President Milosevic must be clear that military action last autumn was suspended only because of his agreement to cease fire, to withdraw part of his military units in Kosovo, and to return the rest to barracks. The North Atlantic Council met yesterday and agreed that General Clark and General Naumann, NATO's two most senior generals, should visit Belgrade with a clear message that President Milosevic must comply in full with the agreements he made.

On its part, the Kosovo Liberation Army has committed more breaches of the ceasefire, and until this weekend was responsible for more deaths than the security forces. It must stop undermining the ceasefire and blocking political dialogue. Neighbouring countries, in particular Albania, must be more resolute in halting the flow of weapons, which fuels the conflict.

Neither side can win this war. The Kosovo Liberation Army cannot defeat the Yugoslav Army, and instead of liberating the people of Kosovo can only prolong their suffering. Belgrade cannot end the conflict by atrocities such as we saw this weekend, which will only drive more young men into the ranks of the KLA and swell the ranks of those who demand independence.

The only way in which stability can be restored in Kosovo is through political dialogue. I urge both sides now to get down to meaningful negotiations on the basis of the Contact Group proposals. That is the best way in which the Kosovo Albanians can honour those who died in this appalling massacre, and in which Belgrade can show real regret at the actions of its security forces. That is also the only way in which we will prevent such atrocities recurring.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. The whole House will share the shock and outrage that he expressed at the appalling massacre that took place at Racak on Friday, and will join in his condemnation. It was impossible to witness those scenes on television without being both deeply moved and deeply angered.

We also share the Foreign Secretary's desire for the International War Crimes Tribunal to be allowed to investigate this war crime and to bring to justice those responsible. Can he tell us a little more about how he proposes to achieve that objective? In November, the Minister of State told my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) that he would ensure that the United Nations Security Council would take further action to implement resolution 1207. What actions have been taken, and what action is now proposed, to ensure full compliance with that resolution? Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that the economic sanctions agreed by the Contact Group last year are still in place? Is there any prospect of persuading other countries, including Russia, to join in imposing them?

I pay tribute, as did the Foreign Secretary, to the courage and commitment of the OSCE verification force. Can he comment on reports that, on Saturday, the OSCE assured the villagers of Racak that its teams would stay in order to deter the Serbs from attacking the survivors of the massacre, but that they were subsequently forced to leave by Serbian forces?

Was it not clear even before this activity that the October agreement had been breached? The violence had not ended, the military and interior police had not been withdrawn, full protection for civilians had not been secured and moves towards democratic autonomy had not taken place. What is the status of the agreement now, and what more can the Foreign Secretary tell us about the future of the OSCE representatives? How is their safety to be secured?

In October, the Foreign Secretary gave assurances that the verification force would be backed by NATO aircraft, and that together they would be able to monitor

"every movement of the security forces."

Has that surveillance been carried out? Today's statement from NATO says that the activation orders for air operations remain in place. In October, the Foreign Secretary said:

"The only way to ensure that Milosevic keeps his promises is to keep the credible threat of force hanging over him."

In November, he said:

"We will react to any substantial breach of the ceasefire by Belgrade by reactivating the order to our military commanders to commence military action."

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us where matters stand now? Has that threat been lifted, or is it still in place? If it is still in place, what prospect is there of its being implemented?

Mr. Cook: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for endorsing the concern that is shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House about this terrible atrocity. He is right: we have experienced great difficulty in securing compliance from both sides with the Holbrooke package. The Kosovo Liberation Army has repeatedly broken the ceasefire, and, last month, seized a number of Serb hostages. On the other side, we have achieved an outcome that is unsatisfactory from our point of view, in that there are far more Serb military units out of barracks than there should be. The agreement provides for three companies to be out of barracks in Kosovo; at the last count, there were 12.

We maintain exactly the surveillance that I promised the House last November—although, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman will appreciate, the extent to which NATO aircraft can fly and observe depends in part on the weather and whether it is possible to observe what is happening on the ground. The Kosovo verification mission has given us instant, rapid, accurate information about the situation on the ground. It took us several months to discover the full details of the tragedy at Srebrenica, but within 12 hours we were able to establish the facts of what had happened at Racak. That has greatly helped us to produce a swift and robust international response. We will, of course, continue to monitor the safety of those verifiers—we have a particular duty to the British members of the verifier teams—to ensure that their safety is not put at unacceptable risk.

What happened at Racak yesterday is that verifiers were deployed. They acted properly and reasonably on the assurances that they had been given by Belgrade that Belgrade would co-operate with them in assuring the villagers that they would stay. I regret to inform the House that the local commanders flagrantly refused to co-operate, refused the representations by General Drewienkiewicz that they should not enter the village in force, proceeded to do so and then proceeded to shell the village. In those circumstances, I believe that General Drewienkiewicz was entirely correct to order the verifiers to leave. The fault lies with Belgrade for its failure to comply and to co-operate with the verification mission. That will be a central part of the discussions that Generals Clark and Naumann will have tomorrow in Belgrade.

Finally, I repeat to the right hon. and learned Gentleman—and to President Milosevic—that the actiration order or the actord remains in being. The

[Mr. Cook]

outcome of the decision in November is that it will require one political decision by the North Atlantic Council to trigger that actord. In the meantime, it remains in being and the planes remain on 96 hours' notice.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The activation of the NATO bombing is unlikely to make any serious contribution to a solution because no military solution will do that. Is there not the prospect, alas, of even further atrocities from both sides? Expressions of horror, however justified, and demands that something must be done do not amount to a strategy.

If, as my right hon. Friend has said, the strategy is to ensure the autonomy of the province within Serbia, that will surely imply pressure on both sides to the conflict. Is he prepared to commit, with our allies, the necessary personnel and pressure on both sides to ensure that?

Mr. Cook: I can assure my hon. Friend that pressure has been applied to both sides throughout. Part of the complexity, though, of applying pressure to the Kosovo Albanian side is that there are different perspectives from the elected leadership of the Kosovo Albanians around Dr. Rugova and from members of the KLA, who do not regard Dr. Rugova as someone from whom they will accept leadership or as a representative of their people. That makes it difficult to build a meaningful negotiating team from the Kosovar Albanian side.

My hon. Friend makes a fair point: any military action needs to be tied to a clear political settlement and a strategy to achieve that political settlement. A political settlement is on offer. It would enable Belgrade to withdraw from the conflict without further cost, loss of life or continued isolation in the world community. It would also enable the Kosovar Albanians themselves to proceed to govern their own affairs, including their internal security.

That is a prize for both sides. It is deeply frustrating for the international community that, despite vigorous pressure on both sides, we have yet to secure a single negotiating session between teams representing both of them.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The atrocity is appalling, even by the standards that we have come to expect in the Balkans.

Can the Foreign Secretary confirm reports that there is continuing military action against the village of Racak by tanks and artillery of the Belgrade Government? If that is so, is it not a clear breach of the Geneva convention?

Does not the refusal of entry to the prosecutor simply pile provocation on outrage? Does the Foreign Secretary share the view that the continuing failure to allow access would rightly be seen as complicity by the Belgrade Government in the massacre and would undermine any moral authority that Belgrade might have to govern Kosovo?

Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear that, although NATO will not become the air force of the KLA, all of NATO's assets are available to protect the innocent citizens of Kosovo if they are subjected to deliberate aggression by the Serbian Government, and that United Kingdom forces are ready to play their part?

Mr. Cook: First, I entirely endorse the right hon. and learned Gentleman's comments on the appalling character of the atrocity. I have heard of reports of military action today not around Racak itself, but around the neighbouring villages. I am not currently in a position entirely to confirm those reports, but I have to warn the House that they sound plausible. Regardless, we already know that there were vigorous actions by the Serb security forces on Friday and again—despite representations from the Kosovo verification mission—on Sunday. Therefore, already actions have twice occurred that are wholly unacceptable and are plainly in breach of the agreements that President Milosevic gave both to NATO and to the OSCE.

British forces are already playing a part in making those agreements a reality. We contribute aircraft to the air verification mission and the second largest national ground contingent to the Kosovo verification mission. General Drewienkiewicz is the chief of operations there, and our people are playing a key part in ensuring that the operation is successfully mounted. We also make a major contribution to the extraction force organised among European countries across the border in Macedonia, should we have to get the verifiers out.

In all those regards, Britain is playing a major part. We stand ready, of course, to consider what may be sensible in the future. However, any further military commitment in Kosovo must clearly depend on a political settlement between the two main parties. We cannot commit additional resources without knowing that both sides are committed to an outcome.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): As my right hon. Friend said, in all the time that we have been talking and using diplomatic methods, we have achieved very little. The peace talks have not yet even started, and I doubt that they will start. There would be very little agreement between the two sides, as there is very little agreement between them on anything. We have been patient long enough. Sooner or later, troops will have to go in. In my view, it should be sooner rather than later.

Mr. Cook: The position that the Government took—with much support in the House—was that, in the right circumstances, we would be willing to consider ground troops as part of the package that was brokered last autumn. Other countries within NATO said publicly that they were not prepared to make such a commitment. I do not think that the House would expect us to commit British troops in isolation from action by our major allies.

Currently, after the experience of the past three months—and as I just said to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell)—I should be very hesitant about committing ground troops in Kosovo unless there was a clear commitment by both sides to a political track. If we were to commit forces in the current situation, there is a danger that we would end up being the people keeping apart two sides, both of which seem intent on carrying out war and undermining the ceasefire. Those are not circumstances in which peacekeeping can operate. We shall first have to see some evidence of good will, good faith and a strong commitment to a political negotiation.

If my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) studies with care the detailed paper prepared by the Contact Group, she will note that it contains much common ground for both sides. I commend Christopher

Hill on the way in which he has patiently taken account of the views of both sides. Most of the argument rests on what will happen after the three-year interim period. I tell both sides, particularly the Kosovar side: for heaven's sake, let us not make what happens three years from now prevent us from getting on with seizing agreement that can secure stability in the short term and lead to the basis for peace in the long term.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that perhaps the time has come—as it did earlier, in the Bosnia conflict—when we have a difficult decision to make, which is either we stay all the way out or we get all the way in? We either say to ourselves, "That is a far away country of which we know little and care less—let them kill each other to the last drop of blood", or, with the French and our other allies, seriously prepare an active intervention force.

Mr. Cook: No one could possibly accuse the Government of treating Kosovo as a far away country of which we know little; on the contrary, we are more committed than any other European country. Kosovo is part of the European continent. Europe itself cannot have any pride or any rest while there is such instability and such atrocity immediately over the borders of the European Union.

However, I advise the hon. Gentleman not to be too glib in demanding an expeditionary force. What is the expeditionary force to do? Is it supposed to take on the KLA as well as the Serb security forces? In the present circumstances, it would have to be prepared to do that. The only casualty that the verification mission has sustained so far was from a shot by the KLA. We would have to consider with great care the commitments that we had from both sides and the political process that we were seeking to support by our presence on the ground.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I thank my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for the balanced way in which he presented the background against which the hideous massacre occurred. I ask him to resist those who believe that there is an easy way out through the invasion of Serbia by Britain—the United States would not send troops. There is no provision which says that Britain, the European Union or NATO is the policeman of the world. Hideous atrocities occur in many countries: there is injustice to Palestinians and to Kurds; there are injustices all over the world. Success will come through negotiated settlements. I detected from his answer that my right hon. Friend believes that that might form the basis of a durable solution.

Mr. Cook: I entirely agree that there are no easy answers. If there were, we should be making rapid progress to implement them. I also agree that it is important to focus on getting momentum behind the political track and trying to achieve agreement between both sides, but I am conscious that only the credible threat of military force, if necessary, is likely to engage both sides in dialogue. We need to get that balance right.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the right hon. Gentleman use as support the resolution that was passed in Vienna on Friday by the 55 nations of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe? It was jointly sponsored by the Russians and the Americans and called on all parties in Kosovo to co-operate with the International War Crimes Tribunal to investigate possible crimes against humanity. It says:

> "Those who refuse to co-operate with international efforts should face consequences and be held accountable for their acts."

It goes on:

> "We call upon the leadership of the OSCE . . . to take appropriate measures to provide protection and security for mission personnel."

The Russians were even willing to add:

> "One of these measures is the extraction force deployed in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia."

There was unanimous agreement that the whole of Europe should act positively to bring pressure to bear on Serbia. Even the French agreed.

Mr. Cook: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments. The OSCE can take some satisfaction from the way in which it has risen to this difficult and complex task. I pay particular tribute to my opposite numbers, the Foreign Ministers of Poland and Norway, who have presided over the OSCE during this period. I should like to reinforce strongly one point that the right hon. Gentleman made: individuals have to be held to account for their responsibility for the crimes that they commit. We have to escape from the idea that because the victims belong to a different ethnic group such actions are not crimes and their perpetrators will be immune from prosecution. The only way to escape from that vicious cycle is to make it clear that we shall hold individually responsible those who commit war crimes. All those serving in Kosovo are on notice that they will be held individually to account for their actions.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not clear that, as in Bosnia, the Serbians involved will not hesitate to commit atrocities—as over the weekend—against civilians, quite regardless of international protests and the International War Crimes Tribunal? Has not the time come to stop giving warnings to Belgrade and instead to act along military lines and bomb Serbian military installations? I ask my right hon. Friend a question that is bound to be asked by Muslims in Europe and elsewhere—are the lives of Muslims worth less than those of other people?

Mr. Cook: I would certainly rebut totally any suggestion that we hold the lives of Kosovar Albanians or Muslims any more lightly than the lives of anyone else. The purpose of my statement today was to underline the enormous gravity that we attach to this terrible atrocity. I sense from the House that that sense of shock and revulsion at what has happened is shared by everybody within the House. As I have said, the actord remains in place, and it requires only one political decision to trigger it. Generals Clark and Naumann will be spelling that out to President Milosevic tomorrow, when they demand full compliance.

I repeat that it is vital that we find and bring to justice the individuals who carried out this war crime. Bombing other Serb installations would not be the appropriate or right way of getting hold of those who committed this crime. Belgrade has an opportunity to distance itself from

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the crime by co-operating and bringing to justice those who committed it. If they refuse to do so tomorrow, they will become complicit in the crime.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I, too, express my admiration for the astonishing bravery of the verification force, which is carrying out an extremely difficult task under hazardous conditions. May I warn the Foreign Secretary that as the weather improves, so the fighting will intensify—as it always does in the Balkans—that substantial arms are flowing to the KLA and that the Serbs have no intention of backing down? Is it not clear, therefore, that we should now consider with our partners and colleagues whether the verifiers should be armed to look after themselves in self-defence? Finally, will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that Generals Clark and Naumann will not be putting forward sanctions against the Serbs tomorrow that they will not willingly undertake when the circumstances require it?

Mr. Cook: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that anything referred to tomorrow carries with it the authority of the North Atlantic Council and the commitment to see it through. I endorse and second the hon. Gentleman's praise for the courage of the verification mission. It takes an enormous commitment to go unarmed, and in lightly clad vehicles, into such hazardous situations.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the danger of tension rising as the weather improves. That is precisely why, back in November, we were anxious to make as rapid progress as possible on the political track so that, by the time the spring thaws came round, we could have changed the political facts on the ground. That is exactly why I am so worried that we have not been able to get meaningful negotiations under way, and why we will be meeting this week—and, perhaps, again next week—to see what momentum we can put into that political track to provide a clear perspective and the hope that by the spring there will be an alternative to military conflict in Kosovo.

Finally, although we must maintain careful scrutiny of the safety of the verifiers, we would be extremely reluctant to go down the path of arming individual verifiers, as suggested by the hon. Gentleman. Let us remember that Racak was brought under mortar and heavy machine gun fire yesterday, which obliged the verifiers to leave. Light sidearms would be of no use in those circumstances, and might well only attract attack.

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and I pay tribute to the verification mission. He indicated that the way forward is a political settlement, based on autonomy for Kosovo. Does he recall that, under the 1974 constitution, the Kosovar Albanians had their own national assembly, national bank and supreme court, had equal representation on the Yugoslavian presidency and in the assembly and had equal status with Serbia and the other republics in economic decision making? Does he share my view that nothing less than what they had under that 1974 constitution would be acceptable to them now? If such autonomy was on offer, could it be guaranteed by an unarmed verification mission, given the fact that Milosevic was the person who stripped the Kosovars of that autonomy?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the root of the conflict and of the tragedy at the weekend was in the decision taken by President Milosevic to remove the autonomy that Kosovo had previously enjoyed. Any outcome of the political process must at least restore to Kosovo the same degree of autonomy that it has enjoyed historically. It is not a simple matter of turning back the clock, because the period to which my hon. Friend referred was the period in which Yugoslavia existed, so Kosovo enjoyed its autonomy within a much wider state than the present small bounds of Serbia. That is why, ultimately, if we want to secure a democratic and self-governing Kosovo, we must also ensure that it exists within a democratic Serbia that respects freedom of expression and human rights.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): We are all aware of the sanctions and threats that have been used against Belgrade. As the Foreign Secretary said that responsibility for the breakdown of the ceasefire could be placed equally with the Yugoslav forces and the KLA, what sanctions and threats could be used against the KLA?

Mr. Cook: We have vigorously denounced the KLA in just about every international forum. We have also, through Security Council resolutions, called on states neighbouring Kosovo and on others in Europe to act to try to cut off the flow of both funds and weapons to the KLA. We are actively reviewing what more we can do to apply pressure to the choke points in the supply of weapons to the KLA. We are not dealing with a state or, indeed, an organisation with any clear political leadership or representation, so it is much more difficult to apply effective pressure, especially when the KLA refuses to take part in negotiations.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I thank my right hon. Friend for the tone and caution of his statement. If there is to be a 96-hour warning period before military action—if that happens, heaven help us—will there be an opportunity for a serious discussion in the House of Commons on a matter that has great long-term consequences? What is the attitude of the west towards the further break-up of the Yugoslav state? What is our policy on that?

Mr. Cook: First, I want to clarify one point because I would not want the House to be under any misapprehension: the 96 hours to which I referred is the period of notice in which planes are on standby; it is not necessarily the same as a 96-hour warning period. I have reported to the House repeatedly on the situation in Kosovo and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, and I can give my hon. Friend an undertaking that we will certainly continue to do that before events achieve any worse momentum than at present.

My hon. Friend asked about a break-up. The position taken by the international community in all its different manifestations—including the European Union, the Contact Group and the Security Council—is that we do not support independence for Kosovo. That is partly because the countries in the neighbourhood would

strongly resent and resist any attempt to establish an independent Kosovo because of the destabilising effect on themselves—and we should always remember that the agenda of the KLA is not independence for Kosovo, but a Greater Albania. It would also have an effect in Bosnia about which all hon. Members should be concerned: it would be very difficult to resist the demand of Republika Srpska for independence if Kosovo were to succeed in achieving it.

For all those reasons, we have resisted the calls for independence for Kosovo, but the persistent non-compliance by President Milosevic, and atrocities such as those that happened this weekend at Racak, make it extremely difficult for us to convince the people of Kosovo that they have a future short of independence.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Notwithstanding the Foreign Secretary's last remark—and I recognise the importance of the statement that he has made in the vexatious circumstances following the gruesome massacre in Racak—I hope that he will not preclude any ultimate political outcome. Although the interim period is for three years, the right hon. Gentleman has not defined or clarified in any meaningful sense the objective that the Government are working to achieve at the end of that period. Could it not be that, eventually, self-determination will prove to be the only durable settlement?

Mr. Cook: The Christopher Hill paper contains provision for a review at the end of that three-year period. However, the contention over how strong that review should be is at the heart of the disagreement between Belgrade and the Kosovar Albanians about the Hill paper. It will be difficult to find an outcome in which both sides can agree to common words in the review at the end of the three-year interim period, yet I believe that the immediate way forward for the Kosovar Albanians is to engage in the process of creating autonomous, self-governing and democratic institutions during that period. It is very frustrating that, so far, we have been unable to construct an Albanian negotiating team that is willing even to discuss that.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend continue to take the strongest possible action to ensure that President Milosevic is aware of our horror at what has happened and our determination to act when necessary?

I was in Kosovo a few weeks before Christmas with UNICEF. Although we are talking today about the horror that occurred at Racak, the horror in Kosovo has been going on for months. Many people there feel that the Serbian Government's aim is to cleanse Kosovo of the ethnic Albanians.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress the widespread suffering and hardship experienced in Kosovo as a result of the repression organised by Belgrade. Among the most distressing features of the security force's actions last autumn were the destruction of the harvest in the fields and the shooting of farm animals in their barns. There is no doubt that the intention was to make it more difficult for the Kosovar Albanians to get through the winter.

We remain strongly committed to humanitarian relief and, as a nation, we are doing as much as any other to support such work in Kosovo. Events such as those of last weekend make it much more difficult to get on top of the problem. We believe that at least 5,500 additional refugees were created in the region by those events.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Foreign Secretary bear in mind the words of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who reminded the House that horrible atrocities are being perpetrated in a number of countries and that Britain cannot become the world's policeman? Are we not faced with just another example of Britain committing our overstretched armed forces to a mission that lacks a clear and long-term military objective? What would the Foreign Secretary tell the wife, mother or family of a member of the British verification team if that member were seized by a kidnapping group, given that he would not have had any kind of weapon with which to defend himself?

Mr. Cook: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that there is no question of Britain being the world's policeman, but we are proud of the way in which we play our part and make a major contribution to the world community. We participate in events in the former Yugoslavia, in Bosnia and in Kosovo as a member of the North Atlantic alliance and as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. We cannot expect to retain our position as a permanent member of that council—and the respect that goes with it—and as a major member of the North Atlantic alliance if we are not willing to take part in actions when mounting such actions is deemed necessary.

In respect of the hon. Gentleman's question about the Kosovo verification mission, it is not for me to answer on my own—it is also for the mission's members. In a spirit of humility, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the various statements that they have made over the weekend, in which they have made it clear that they are determined to get on with the job, that they are sorry to have pulled out of Racak and that they are proud of what they are doing. I think that we should be proud of them.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): Is it not extraordinary and tragic that a 20th century that was scarred by Nazi genocide is ending not only with the recent genocide in Bosnia, but with the current atrocities in Kosovo? Despite the complexities, which we understand, is there not one common factor—Milosevic himself, who, time and again, has shown himself to be the puppet master of evil in the former Yugoslavia? Why do we treat him as a statesman and not name him as a war criminal? Would the Government support efforts by the International War Crimes Tribunal to try Milosevic for his crimes, for which he is responsible?

Mr. Cook: It is for the prosecutor of the International War Crimes Tribunal to decide whether to indict any citizen or politician in the former Yugoslavia, and that is a matter that that body must address. If any member of the regime in Belgrade or elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia were to be indicted, we would, as we do on all other occasions, support the tribunal's right to make that indictment and support the case for a trial.

However, the important aspect of my hon. Friend's question is not simply the issue of the personal responsibility of President Milosevic, but the

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backward-looking and poisonous ethnic hatred that makes up the politics of so much of the regime in Belgrade. That is why, as part of our response to the problems of Kosovo and Bosnia, we have persistently said that there must be freedom of expression, a free media and genuine and meaningful democracy in Serbia as a condition of Serbia taking its place in the modern world and the modern Europe.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): In endorsing every word of the question asked by the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), may I ask the Foreign Secretary whether he and his advisers believe that President Milosevic either authorised, or at least approved after the event, the massacre that has just taken place? If the right hon. Gentleman thinks that President Milosevic backs those terrible murders, what does he think the motivation is? Could it be to terrorise the local population, to drive them out of Kosovo, or even to test NATO so that Milosevic can see how many murders NATO is prepared to put up with before taking action, as it eventually and belatedly did in Bosnia?

Mr. Cook: I repeat to the hon. Gentleman what I told my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks)—the indictment of an alleged war criminal is not a matter for me or for the Government, but one for the prosecutor of the International War Crimes Tribunal. It is for her to decide whether there is a case to answer. I have no evidence of the sort the hon. Gentleman seeks. The important point is that Belgrade now has an opportunity to respond in a positive way to international representations. If Belgrade did not order the massacre, if it is not complicit in the massacre and if it shares our concern about the number of civilian deaths, Belgrade can now prove that by allowing the International War Crimes Tribunal to carry out a thorough investigation.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Is not the bottom line the fact that the KLA, in pursuing its objective of a Greater Albania, is making decision taking in NATO extremely difficult? If, at the end of all this, NATO cannot take any military action in Kosovo, the KLA will be solely to blame because it will have prevented such action.

Mr. Cook: As I have said on more than one occasion this afternoon, there is fault on both sides and the KLA must accept its responsibility for the present situation because of its repeated breaches of the ceasefire. At the same time, we cannot escape the clear and stark conclusion that primary responsibility for the massacres that occurred this weekend lies with the security forces that were in the village at the time.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): The Foreign Secretary has spelt out the options and difficulties facing him and other members of NATO, and the House understands those. However, if there is, as appears likely, another example of a massacre initiated by the Serbs, what deterrent value will the threat of air strikes against Serbia have? I might be misinterpreting the Foreign Secretary, but it seems to me that he is ambivalent about whether air strikes would achieve their objective. Many hon. Members are concerned that, ultimately, we will keep threatening military action and the Serbs will not be impressed. That will have an immediate impact upon the independence and the lives of the British people who constitute the verification force.

This may be an unfair question to ask the Foreign Secretary, but I suspect that it is much in the minds of the families of those who are serving in the verification force. What guarantee do we have that the British and French-led extraction force will achieve its objective of entering Kosovo and removing members of the verification force if the situation gets completely out of hand?

Mr. Cook: The extraction force is there specifically with that mission in mind. It is training for that mission and preparing plans for it. I cannot give a guarantee that any military action of that character will be 100 per cent. successful—and the hon. Gentleman would not believe me if I attempted to do so. However, that is the extraction force's mission, and we believe that we have provided a significant contribution that will assist the force in carrying out that mission.

However, our first task is to try to prevent circumstances arising in which that contingency plan will be necessary. That is precisely why the two most senior generals in NATO will be in Belgrade tomorrow giving a firm message to President Milosevic. The hon. Gentleman and President Milosevic should be in no doubt about our commitment to ensuring that we both defend our people who are part of the Kosovo verification mission and insist upon President Milosevic's compliance with the undertakings that he gave to Richard Holbrooke.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Would not the Foreign Secretary's claim that he wants those responsible for war crimes to be brought to book carry a little more weight if he were willing to encourage proactively the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague to indict President Milosevic, who many believe is the biggest war criminal of all? After all, he gives the orders. Are not the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) and some Labour Members absolutely correct to assert that we now face a desperate and unenviable choice: either withdraw completely, wash our hands of the problem and witness a blood bath or perhaps a wider Balkans war; or be willing to commit ground forces?

Mr. Cook: I have repeatedly made it clear—and not only today—that President Milosevic plainly carries political responsibility for much of what has happened throughout the former Yugoslavia over the past decade. It is not for me to judge whether that makes him criminally culpable—nor am I in the right locus to do so. That is a matter for the International War Crimes Tribunal and for the prosecutors to decide.

The tribunal is in no doubt about the very strong support that it receives from the British Government, and it said so to me when I visited it in The Hague last Wednesday. During that visit, I released another £120,000 to assist the tribunal with translating documents from Serb or Croat in order to allow it to continue its work. This Government, more than any other, are supporting the tribunal with personnel, funding, witness support schemes and an additional court room. We shall continue to give vigorous support to the tribunal's very important work.

BILLS PRESENTED

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Clive Efford, supported by Mr. John Austin, Ms Julia Drown, Mr. David Chaytor, Mr. David Lepper, Mr. Peter Bottomley and Mr. Matthew Taylor, presented a Bill to make further provision for energy efficiency: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed [Bill 32].

Energy Conservation (Housing)

Mr. Clive Efford, supported by Mr. John Austin, Ms Julia Drown, Mr. David Chaytor, Mr. David Lepper, Mr. Peter Bottomley and Mr. Matthew Taylor, presented a Bill to make further provision for energy conservation related to housing; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed [Bill 33].

Opposition Day

[3rd Allotted Day]

NHS (Rationing)

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.23 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that rationing has always been a part of how the Health Service manages health care resources; expresses its dismay at the comments of the Right honourable Member for Dulwich and West Norwood denying the obvious fact that rationing exists in the Health Service; expresses grave concern at the proposed changes to be effected by Her Majesty's Government, which through bureaucratic bodies such as a National Institute for Clinical Excellence and a Commission for Health Improvement will force clinicians to carry the burden on rationing decisions; recognises that the availability of modern drugs for conditions such as schizophrenia and MS makes clear the reality of rationing in today's Health Service; recognises the fact that waiting lists are a hidden form of rationing; notes that excessive political concentration upon waiting lists has been largely responsible for the continuing winter crisis in the Health Service, over which Her Majesty's Government appears wholly complacent and unconcerned; and urges Her Majesty's Government to acknowledge the concerns of professional bodies such as the BMA over rationing and embark upon a mature debate on the future of the Health Service.

I believe that we need to debate rationing in our health service today more than at any other time in its history. I am greatly encouraged to see that the amendment submitted by the Liberal Democrats is almost the same, word for word, as our main motion. In his endeavours to spin Government reaction before the debate, the Secretary of State for Health told the press that this was some deep-seated right-wing plot. I have many views about the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), but by no stretch of the imagination could he be described as a right-wing plot. Indeed, I would submit that our motion and the hon. Gentleman's amendment are the same in that they strongly reflect the views and concerns of the general public, and their longing for a clear and grown-up debate about rationing.

Our health service is currently embroiled in one of the worst winter crises to hit our hospitals for many years. It is not only the Conservative party that is saying so, but the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing. Now, even the Secretary of State is at last prepared to admit that our hospitals cannot cope with the added pressure that the Government have placed on them.

That sudden rush to accept culpability does not extend to the Prime Minister or his press secretary. Reporting the glad tidings of our Prime Minister's descent on St. Thomas's hospital last week, his spokesman told us that the Prime Minister

"did not come away thinking that the Health Service is in a crisis."

"Crisis? What crisis?" seems to be the attitude emanating from Downing street.

The increasing difficulties being experienced in our health service have underlying causes that are far more serious than the recent flu outbreak, which, I remind the Secretary of State, has at no time escalated to epidemic

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proportions. He will remember that he claimed that in the absence of such an epidemic or an exceptionally harsh winter, the service could look forward to the winter with confidence. Where is that confidence now? The Government's increased rationing of clinical services, coupled with their pressure on hospitals to force through quick, simple waiting list cases, have been a double whammy against the ability of our health service to cope with the wholly predictable increase in winter pressures.

The Secretary of State will remember, because I have reminded him of it, his party's pledge in 1996 to set up a task force on trolleys and to monitor the number of patients forced to wait for treatment in that manner. The Labour party may have broken its pledge, but not to worry because we have been monitoring the situation that caused so many sleepless nights for the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). I have to inform the Secretary of State that the situation is far worse than he could ever have imagined in his complacency.

A patient died, waiting in pain, on a trolley at St. George's hospital in London. His consultant described the conditions as the worst that he had seen in 20 years, with the standard of care being worse than in India. An elderly man died of heart failure in Whipps Cross hospital after waiting over 18 hours on a trolley. A child died from meningitis after being left on a trolley for hours in Rotherham general hospital because there was no bed.

Bodies were stacked up in refrigerated lorries at two hospitals in Norwich and at the Derbyshire Royal infirmary because there was nowhere else to keep them. A patient's body was lost for five days in the grounds of Chase Farm hospital, Enfield, after he had walked out of the ward and fallen into a ditch. At two Portsmouth hospitals, relatives were forced to provide basic nursing care for their loved ones for the first time in the history of our health service.

The Prime Minister has the barefaced cheek to deny that that is a crisis. Perhaps he might have been right if his Government had not closed 679 hospital beds in London alone during 1998, after years of telling us that London needed more, not fewer, beds. It is now clear that such decisions and the obsession with Labour's fiddled waiting list pledge have led directly to the shocking events of the past month.

I wonder if the Secretary of State recalls what Baroness Jay said shortly before last winter? She said:

"We won't see a return to a situation where people are being helicoptered around the country in search of an Intensive Care bed."

I would be only a few weeks out of season if I said, "Ho, ho, ho." What about the shameful case of the elderly patient at Hemel Hempstead hospital? The right hon. Gentleman obviously finds that case funny; we shall find out whether the rest of the House does. The Secretary of State plans to close that hospital's brand new accident and emergency department. That patient was suffering from a potentially fatal respiratory infection, and had to be airlifted 150 miles in agony all the way to Somerset. How can the right hon. Gentleman even attempt to wriggle out of responsibility for much—not all—of that state of affairs?

It is clear that the concentration of resources on waiting lists and the climate of fear that the Secretary of State has created among clinical and managerial staff has harmed other sectors of our health service, led to increased rationing and resulted in this disastrous winter. He will be aware that not just we, but the British Medical Association, which for many months and not only with the wisdom of hindsight, has been claiming that his obsession with numbers on waiting lists—not even waiting times—is distorting clinical priorities. In the words of the British Association for Accident and Emergency Medicine,

"the principal reason is the emphasis placed on allocating resources to waiting lists, which has resulted in a reduction of beds for emergency cases".

Let us take instead the words of the *British Medical Journal*.

"The government's emphasis on reducing waiting lists . . . has caused difficulties in coping with emergency cases".

If that is too esoteric for the Secretary of State, let him try the words of a ward manager, nurse Helen Truscott, who works at St. Mary's in Paddington. She said:

"There is a crisis in the Health Service, but it's not just in the winter, it is now all the year through. A few years ago we would have had some spare beds on the ward overnight. Now we've got patients left lying on trolleys in casualty."

If the Secretary of State is in any doubt that that is due to his Government—the Government who gave voters before the election 14 days to save the NHS—all he has to do is listen to doctors and nurses, in whose minds there is no doubt about who is responsible.

I shall now be very kind to the Secretary of State. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Yes, I shall. He will remember that, a few weeks ago, I made a promise to him. I said that if he abandoned his ridiculous obsession with raw numbers on lists and instead concentrated on waiting times, and if, in addition, he used not just crude cut-off times but made those times relevant to conditions, as the BMA has asked, I would not gloat but say, "Well done" and support him. I renew that promise today—though more in hope than in faith.

I ask the Secretary of State also to face up to reality. We have been saying for some time that there are no easy solutions of the kind that his party promised in opposition. I go so far as to say that, in opposition, his party deceived Britain. His party said that there was nothing wrong with the NHS other than a Tory Government. It said: "All you have to do is change the Government and we, Labour, will put it all right. The NHS will be able to do it all. It will be able to meet expectations and look forward to endless winters with confidence. All you have to do is vote Labour." Let the right hon. Gentleman look around him at the results of voting Labour. There never were easy solutions. A one-eyed concentration on waiting lists has not helped; nor has the complacently late payment of winter pressures money.

However, such matters are not the cause of deep-seated and underlying problems, which the Secretary of State's Government have persistently refused to acknowledge, always pretending that the health service can do it all and that, somehow, it has a magic wand. They have always pretended that the health service can meet every last demand, provide every new treatment and supply all the very latest drugs—all in the face of increasing demand and accelerating technology.

The Government can have no credibility, given that the Minister for Public Health, who is not present, can stand

at the Dispatch Box glibly and fatuously stating that there is no rationing in our health service. I asked her, in perfectly simple terms:

"Is there rationing, or is there not?"—[*Official Report*, 15 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 746.]

She replied, "No." She did not qualify her answer; she did not enlarge upon it. "No", she said and sat down, looking as though she had said something wonderful.

Far be it from me to embarrass the Minister, especially when she is not present, but it seems that she is so far out of step with medical opinion that even the normally restrained *Doctor* magazine felt moved to complain that the Government were like—I quote the editorial—*[Laughter.]* Well, this is the GPs' view. The magazine said that the Government were like

"A child hiding under the bedclothes".

[Interruption.] I shall repeat that, because Labour Members do not want to hear it. They are going to hear it, and people listening to the debate are going to hear it, because it represents the views of the profession on the absolutely inaccurate statement by the Minister for Public Health.

The profession says that the Government are like

"A child hiding under the bedclothes . . . imagining the problem of rationing is a monster that will go away if it refuses to acknowledge it."

The editorial said that the right hon. Lady was "embracing a laughable pretence", that the Government's denial made them a "laughing stock" and that the Government should be

"mature enough to concede that the NHS is not equipped to cope with demand".

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I shall finish this selection; then I shall remember the hon. Gentleman.

Let us find out whether the absent Minister is prepared to stand by those comments. I shall ensure that she gets a copy of *Hansard* just in case. Does she disagree with Professor Sikora of the World Health Organisation, who says that terminally ill cancer patients in Britain have to pay thousands of pounds for life-prolonging drugs because of lack of cash? It has long been the case that doctors rank cancer cases on the chances of an effective cure or a lengthy prolongation of life. Why do the Government deny that that is rationing?

Dying breast cancer patients are paying £12,000 for a six-month course of Taxol. Patients with cancer of the colon are paying £8,000 for Ironotecan. Lung cancer victims are obliged to find £6,000 for Gemcitabine. Professor Thomas of the university of Surrey says that she has cash disputes with the health service on behalf of patients every two to three weeks.

If the Minister for Public Health does not find the World Health Organisation convincing, perhaps she will listen to the National Schizophrenia Fellowship and the Bethlem and Maudsley hospitals. They tell us that mentally ill patients are being given drugs, developed in the 1950s—such as Haldol—that have crippling side-effects. Even 1970s drugs—such as Clozapine, which is not without its problems—are being rationed. As for obtaining the latest atypical anti-psychotics, such as Risperidone and Olanzapine, those were usually found to be prescribable only in the last resort, when all other drugs had failed.

Surely the Minister for Public Health and the Secretary of State are no longer prepared to make the ridiculous statement that there is no such thing as rationing in our health service. If they are, perhaps they would like to explain that to Mrs. Goldsworth, who has had to re-mortgage her home for £100,000 to pay Frenchay hospital in Bristol for supplies of beta interferon, to keep her out of a wheelchair.

We are not just talking about drugs. Routine operations are no longer available in many health authorities. The Secretary of State knows all about the unavailability of non-acute varicose vein operations. He knows that in some areas, one cannot obtain operations on lipomas and sebaceous cysts, and he also knows that, however much he may like to pretend otherwise, waiting lists are a form of rationing by queue. Until we have an honest—and mature—debate on rationing, we shall never tackle patients' increasing disillusionment with our health service.

Mr. Dawson: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. It is important that we should have a mature debate about some of the most serious issues in our country. Will she aid the cause of such mature debate by acknowledging, as gently as she can, the contribution of the previous Government over 18 years to what she calls the serious underlying problems of the national health service? Will she raise the level of the debate so that she does not concentrate quite so much on the difficulties caused to individuals and on trying to take cheap press opportunities by going to hospitals—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

Mr. Dawson:—in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must sit down when I am on my feet. That is going beyond an intervention and becoming a mini-speech.

Miss Widdecombe: Even the part of the hon. Gentleman's remarks that might be identified as an intervention did not take us very far forward, I regret. He asked me to acknowledge the contribution of the previous Government. I shall indeed acknowledge their contribution: the single biggest hospital building programme in history, a steady increase year on year in real terms in NHS resources, nurses pay up 67 per cent. in real terms, 55,000 more nurses and midwives than we inherited, and millions more patients being treated. That is the contribution that we made. What I have—

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East) *rose*—

Mr. Dawson: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It would be for the general good, particularly of those listening beyond this place, if the debate were conducted in a sober and serious manner. The hon. Gentleman must not interrupt or reply to his own question.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman may like talking to himself and replying to his own question. He obviously does not like my reply.

[Miss Widdecombe]

Despite that significant contribution, and despite the fact that our national health service is still the envy of the world and that we looked after it for two thirds of its existence, I have never claimed that we had a perfect NHS, or that there were not many problems that we had to confront, for which we had no magic wand.

The essence of my argument is that there have been problems of rationing in the NHS since the time of Bevan. I am trying to get the Government to acknowledge that we are not in some new era in which that does not apply, and that we need some radical and fresh thinking. That is the thrust of my remarks.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, as she is developing a powerful case. Does she agree that progress in the health service will be retarded by the Government's creation of a plethora of new bureaucratic bodies, including the advisory committee on resource allocation, the commission for health improvement, the capital prioritisation advisory group, the national institute for clinical excellence and, last but not least, the primary care groups? Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ministers should stop pushing paper and start providing for patients?

Miss Widdecombe: My hon. Friend is right. The deep-seated problems that we face are essentially the problems of a successful service that has expanded vastly, beyond anything foreseen by its founding fathers, and which now has the ability to do what would have been science fiction to Bevan and Beveridge. That very successful service has produced a huge gap between demand and the capacity of supply to keep up with it. I agree with my hon. Friend that no amount of reorganisation, creation of extra bodies or new bureaucratic systems will tackle the underlying problem.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey) *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: I shall give way to the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats. However, because we had, for perfectly sensible reasons, a statement on Kosovo, our time for this debate has been severely truncated. When I have taken the hon. Gentleman's intervention, I shall take no more.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. I share with her both the clear view that there is rationing in the health service—I therefore welcome this debate—and the desire for a mature debate across the parties on how we resolve the problems that follow from that self-evident proposition.

I shall ask the right hon. Lady one linked question, which clearly follows, for her. Does she accept that if we are to meet the needs—not the demands—of our people, there will have to be a considerable increase in resources for the health service, which means tax increases, or does she hold to a position that there should be no more tax increases, and that therefore the only way of resolving the problem is for some of the people who currently use the NHS to leave and go to the private health sector, as she argued at her party conference?

Miss Widdecombe: Ah, but there is, in the sensible use of the phrase rather than the Government's use of it, not a third way, but another way, which I shall discuss as I develop my theme.

If we do not have a mature debate on rationing, we shall not be able to tackle the increasing disillusionment with the health service that is felt by patients and those who work in the NHS, and we shall not do much to create a sustainable health service. The NHS last year celebrated 50 years of its existence. I should like to think that there will be celebrations again in 50 years, but that means creating a sustainable service, which cannot be done through wish fulfilment and by burying our heads in the sand, rather than dealing with the real problems.

The Secretary of State must take some responsibility for the existing disillusionment. Labour told people that the health service could do it all. Indeed, he boasted in a television programme in which we both took part that he could make the NHS so wonderful that people "have to be mad" to go private. That represents another 700,000 operations a year which he believes the NHS can encompass, when it cannot even cope with a flu outbreak in winter. Moreover, the right hon. Gentleman has inflated everyone's expectations with his extremely creative accounting in relation to the size of the comprehensive spending review.

Let us consider the matter realistically. The Secretary of State admitted on 16 July last year in response to a parliamentary question that the real size of the increase was not £21 billion, but £10.5 billion. Had we used the same fanciful method of accounting that he uses, whereby sums are double and treble counted, we would probably have ended up spending more than £100 billion. Would anyone have believed such fanciful nonsense? He should stop trying to con people that the health service is awash with money. This winter proves conclusively that it is not.

If the Government are determined simply to use bodies such as NICE and CHIMP to force clinicians to carry the can for rationing decisions, we shall not make much progress. Decisions on clinical priorities should be taken by clinicians, but the frameworks in which those decisions take place should be a matter of public debate and accountability.

The public do not want their intelligence continually insulted by a Government who tell them that there is no rationing, when they know jolly well from their everyday experience that there is plenty of rationing. The fact that the public want more means that we must look for new and imaginative ways of funding some of the modern health care innovations that patients are demanding—the innovations that the Government are finding it impossible to fund by traditional means alone, alongside the core functions of our health service.

I challenge the Government to stop being ideological. They like to speak glibly of bringing down Berlin walls in our health service. At the same time, they dig a grand canyon between the public and private sectors. They cannot bring themselves to accept—I think that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has a similar problem—that private medicine has

benefits for the entire community, despite the role that the private sector is currently playing to bail out our troubled NHS this winter and before.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No, I said clearly that I would not.

We must consider the opportunities—well, I shall give way after all, as I always enjoy the hon. Gentleman's interventions.

Mr. Hinchliffe: On her point about using the private sector, does the right hon. Lady accept that one of the major problems in the national health service relates to staffing levels—shortage of nurses? Will she reflect on where the private sector recruits its nurses?

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): And who trains them.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Lady calls out from a sedentary position, "Who trains them?" The NHS does most of the training, but what develops, pays for and funds most drugs research from which the NHS benefits? The private sector. The fact is that we need a partnership—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Secretary of State needs a few facts.

The Government's contribution to the medical research budget, which probably comes from the Department for Education and Employment, is £350 million. Any single drugs company spends about £1 billion a year on research, and a lot of the results are not sold for profit because they do not come to fruition.

We have to consider the opportunities—

Mr. Hinchliffe: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No, I have had enough—sit down.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No, what the hon. Gentleman said last time was not good enough—

Mr. Hinchliffe: The right hon. Lady has not answered.

Miss Widdecombe: It was not good enough last time, so it will not be good enough this time. The hon. Gentleman has to learn that it is no good shouting from a sedentary position when his Government are considered by the nurses to be one of the worst masters of the health service that they have ever had.

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): Look behind you.

Miss Widdecombe: Why, are the nurses behind me?

We must consider the opportunities presented by the private sector. If we accept that our health service cannot do it all, we either resign ourselves to ever-increasing rationing—which is happening by stealth—or we look to increase the flows of additional new cash into our health service, through common-sense co-operation with the private sector.

That is not only about private insurance, and it is certainly not about patients paying for what they now receive free. It is about the massive investment in pharmaceuticals, research and clinical technology; the private finance initiative, which the Government resisted for so long, but now boast about, helping to fund our hospitals; and co-operation—not Labour hostility—between our health service and private medicine.

That can be seen clearly in what the rest of the world spends on health care. Even if we ignore the American model, spending on the private sector in this country lags behind that of other developed countries. That disparity accounts for the much-quoted difference in gross domestic product spent on health. Such nations have recognised that total spending, not only public spending, is what matters.

The Conservative party is committed to year-on-year increases in public spending on health, but we also have the honesty to acknowledge, and the willingness to debate, the facts. I point out to the Secretary of State that, between 1990 and 1993, our percentage increases were greater than what he proposes. That did not solve all the problems of the health service, nor will his spending. However much more we put into the public sector, and we are committed to doing so, public spending has never done it all, is not doing it all and will never do it all.

Until we face that simple fact, and start the debate from that point and forget any possibility of magic wands—*[Interruption.]* I wish that the Secretary of State would look at me, just occasionally. He appears to be quite incapable of meeting my eyes when I am talking about such things. Indeed, this is a bit like a Wimbledon contest: he looks one way, then the other. He never manages to look at me when I am challenging him. He turns his face from me as he turns his face from the problems in our health service. He has been doing that ever since he took office. He has turned away from the real problems and cannot look them in the eyes.

Let me dispel a few myths. I do not believe, and I have never said, that anybody should be bludgeoned into using the private sector, but I have said consistently that nobody should be made to feel guilty for using it. We should consider the companies and trade unions that have supplied private health care for their employees and members, and the costs and the benefits in terms of health care overall—the totality of funding, public and private, devoted to making patients better. If we do not consider such opportunities and do not ask ourselves about radical new ways of providing for the ever-growing health care needs of our society, not only will this winter of crisis and chaos in our health service be the first of many, but, more important, the health service will become increasingly unsustainable.

I want a thriving health service with state-of-the-art technology, serving the people of this country well 50 years from now as it did 50 years ago. I am afraid that turning that into reality involves rather more courage, and rather more honesty, than the Government are currently prepared to show.

4.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"reaffirms the historic principles of the NHS, that if people are ill or injured there will be a national health service there to help, and access to it will be based on need and need alone, not on ability to

pay or who their general practitioner happens to be or on where they live; welcomes the measures the Government has taken, is taking and will take that will ensure that comparable, top quality treatment and care are available in every part of the country through the introduction of new arrangements for spreading best practice, including the ending of the Conservative competition of the internal market, the introduction of local Health Improvement Programmes and Primary Care Groups to put local doctors, nurses and other health professionals in the driving seat in shaping local health care, the introduction of a new Commission for Health Improvement and National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and the creation of new legal duties of partnership and quality to ensure that all parts of the NHS and social services work together to deliver top quality services to all; welcomes the record £21 billion investment to be made in the NHS, including £18 billion for the NHS in England, over the next three years, notes the record 150,000 fall in NHS waiting lists since April 1998 and the 17 per cent increase in the number of new nurse trainees in the period since Labour came to power; and further welcomes the measures that the Government intends to take over the coming year to continue to build a modern and dependable NHS, including the extension of NHS Direct to cover 19 million people, the creation of 26 Health Action Zones covering 13 million people to target areas with particularly high levels of ill health—including cancer and heart disease—and reduce health inequalities, and the targeted investment of £30 million to modernise accident and emergency departments."

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) called for a measured and mature debate. Her contribution was to mature debate what Les Dawson's jokes were to political correctness. She talked a lot about rationing, and likes to talk about it, but if "rationing" means merely that there is not an unlimited supply of something, it applies to practically everything in the world.

It is no more informative, mature or considered to talk about health care being rationed than to say that education is rationed because there is not an unlimited supply of classrooms or teachers, or that air travel is rationed because there is not a seat left on the plane someone wants to catch.

Those who want to make great political capital out of the rationing accusation are, by sleight of hand, trying to suggest that something quite different is going on—that each patient is permitted only a fixed ration of health care or a fixed number of operations or drugs, regardless of his or her circumstances. That may apply to some people with private health insurance, and it does, but in the national health service that sort of rationing is not happening, and it never has. In the NHS, treatment is according to individual need, not pre-ordained entitlement.

Why, then, do some patients get new treatments and others not? The very process of innovation means that some places will develop new treatments faster than others, while others will be quicker to follow. That product life cycle is as natural in health care as it is in every other sector. In 1940, penicillin was tried out on mice; within a decade, it had saved millions of lives. At one time, only a few dozen patients had access to hip replacements; they were available only in Wigan and Norwich, where they had been developed. Now hip replacements are commonplace.

At one time, the only place in the world where it was possible to have a test-tube baby was Oldham general hospital. Now it is possible in every developed country in the world, but not in every part of this country. Take an even newer technology—cochlear implants—to help deaf people to hear. Thresholds for treatment are coming down as costs fall and as evidence of cost-effectiveness for a wider range of patients becomes available, but there is an eightfold difference in the uptake of this technology between different parts of the NHS in different parts of the country.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Does the Secretary of State accept that, in the past, rationing as he is describing it—for the individual—occurred mainly because of the uneven availability of expertise and expected outcomes, whereas today rationing, as I see it, is determined by the availability of resources for people with the expertise to carry out procedures that we know have an effective outcome? There is financial rationing, rather than rationing of ability.

Mr. Dobson: I certainly do not entirely agree with that point, because in many cases there is the question of the necessary spread of expertise. For instance, any old doctor cannot carry out a cochlear implant, so we need doctors with the necessary skills before expertise can be spread as widely, effectively and quickly as we should like.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way on that point. A constituent of mine is in the early stages of multiple sclerosis and, as the Secretary of State knows, treatment for multiple sclerosis with beta-interferon is carried out on a regional basis. In the west midlands, 47 patients who attend the same centre have been given beta-interferon for multiple sclerosis. On the same waiting list, with the same doctors, are a further 60 patients—sadly, including my constituent—who have been clinically assessed as needing that treatment, but who are not receiving beta-interferon because the region's health authorities cannot afford it. Will the right hon. Gentleman address that question, which follows up the point made a moment ago by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand)?

Mr. Dobson: I shall address that point, because the whole basis of my speech is to explain what we are doing to change the national health service so that we get away from the lottery system that we inherited from the previous Government.

The take-up rate of new treatments, such as Taxol, has been too slow and needs to be speeded up. That time lag is nothing new—it has always existed: there is no new crisis. This is all about how fast patients get extra and better treatments, not about cuts and reductions.

What is new is that the Government are doing something about the problem by putting in place a better-quality system that is better organised for assessing new developments and spreading their use. The speech that we have just heard from the right hon. Lady was the latest round in the endless efforts of the Tory right wing to decry and denigrate the national health service. The Tories have always opposed it. They voted against setting up a national health service, and since then the right wing of the Tory party has taken every opportunity it can to run it down and to suggest that the people of this country would be better off with a different system. The right hon. Lady was at it again today.

The national health service was based on the idea that the best health services should be available to all—the best for all: quality and equality. Despite the damaging reforms of the Tories, the NHS has delivered. Most people

in most parts of the country get a good service from the health service. That is why it is popular. It is the most popular health care system in the English-speaking world.

I believe that the NHS is also popular because the people of this country like the idea that it is fair, that it is there not just to look after them but to look after everybody without fear or favour, and that nobody will miss out because he or she cannot afford to pay. They like the idea that, under the NHS, people qualify for treatment because they need it, not because they can pay for it. The people of this country prefer to pay for health care through their taxes rather than pay each time they see the doctor or have a test or go into hospital. Unlike the Tories, the people of this country do not want to abandon that principle, and nor do we.

There is another good reason why our NHS is so popular. It is much more cost-effective and less wasteful than any other system. That relates back directly to the principles on which it was based. Systems in which patients have to pay each time they are treated put off people who cannot afford it. That is not the end of it; those systems cost a fortune to run. Every item must be separately logged so that it can be included in the bill, invoices have to be sent, payments collected and debts pursued. All that paperwork is very wasteful and costly. By not charging patients each time they are treated, our health service is both more fair and more cost-effective. Fairness and efficiency go together.

When the Tories talk about alternatives to the NHS—as they were today—they want to lumber the people of this country with health systems that are less fair, less efficient and more expensive. That is just what one would expect from the party that gave Britain the poll tax and privatised the railways.

No one can deny that the NHS could always do with more resources than it is getting. That has been true for the past 50 years, but it is equally true of every other health care system, which can always do with more. Replacing our system would not eliminate that problem: it would merely add unfairness and extra costs.

The question that every system must address is how to provide a reasonable level of resources for health care and ensure that the services are top quality and are shared out fairly. Unlike the previous Government, the new Labour Government are tackling those issues. From 1 April this year, we will be investing an extra £21 billion in the NHS—£18 billion in England. We have already made a start on the biggest hospital building programme in the history of the NHS. Not a single private finance initiative hospital was started under the previous Government. Under Labour, work has already started on new hospitals at Dartford and Gravesham, Norfolk and Norwich, Carlisle, Durham, South Manchester, Greenwich, Bromley, High Wycombe, Amersham, Sheffield, Rochdale, Halifax and Reading, and many more are to follow. Smaller schemes will replace unreliable plant and equipment.

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): We started all those hospitals.

Mr. Dobson: I am getting some stick from the hon. Gentleman at the back. The last time I saw him was at the sod-cutting ceremony for the hospital that his area is getting.

Mr. Horam *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: No, no.

Starting in April, one quarter of all accident and emergency departments are to be renewed, which will make them better for patients and safer for staff. Much more is to be invested in equipment to detect and treat cancer, partly using lottery money from the new opportunities fund. That investment will ensure that more and more people in every part of the country will have access to top-quality hospitals, plant and equipment. The Government are determined to end the health lottery that results in some people in some parts of the country not being treated as promptly or as well as people in other areas.

Poor people are ill more often than others and die sooner. When somebody's span of life is cut short by poverty, that is real rationing. The Tories never talk about that sort of rationing. By opening up greater inequalities in wealth, they opened up greater inequalities in health. We are determined to change all that as part of our commitment to reducing inequalities in health and in health care. That is why, with the support of the health care professions—doctors, nurses, midwives, therapists, laboratory scientists—we are starting to change the NHS for the better by making it easier for the professionals to do their jobs, and to do them as well as they want to do them.

The NHS that we inherited has little or no machinery for identifying best practice and spreading it. That is one reason for the problems over new drugs such as Taxol, beta-interferon and Aricept. We are establishing—with, I emphasise, the full support of the professions—the national institute for clinical excellence. Its chairman designate is Sir Michael Rawlins, professor of clinical pharmacology at the university of Newcastle and consultant at the Freeman hospital and the Royal Victoria infirmary, Newcastle. He is the former chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines. His appointment was publicly welcomed by the British Medical Association on the day that I announced it.

The job of NICE will be to appraise new treatments, new drugs and new medical devices, and to issue authoritative guidance to the professionals who wish to use them. That will give individual clinicians more help than they have ever had before when they have to make decisions about the treatment of individual patients. As a result, best practice should be spread much more quickly, and ineffective treatments discouraged. Standards should rise and the same top-quality treatment should be available in every part of the country. NICE will take responsibility for providing the best advice, but each doctor will retain responsibility for the treatment that he or she gives to each individual patient.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I was interested to hear the details about NICE. Will it consider cost-effectiveness as part of its remit? That may not be unreasonable, because there are limited resources. If so, will it ensure that the Government are associated with advice which it gives to clinicians not to prescribe or treat in a certain way because of problems of cost and not of effectiveness, so that politicians take responsibility for the limitation of treatments because of limited resources?

Mr. Dobson: NICE will certainly consider the cost-effectiveness of alternative ways of treating a particular condition. I hope that everyone would agree that that is sensible.

[Mr. Dobson]

We must take matters much further. Studies show that the number of people getting important operations, such as heart bypass operations, varies dramatically from one part of the country to another. People in poor neighbourhoods where heart disease is more prevalent are less likely to obtain operations than people living in more prosperous areas where there is less heart disease. People living near major hospitals are more likely to obtain heart operations than people living further away. That cannot be right, and it must be changed. We are therefore placing a duty on each health authority to draw up a health improvement programme to improve health and health care in its area—targeting special effort on the least healthy. For the same reason, NHS regions are to be given more authority to ensure that each and every part of their areas is properly served.

Following the Calman-Hine approach to cancer services—which, to their credit, the last Government introduced—this Government are introducing more national service frameworks, which will spell out how the NHS should deal with other conditions. They will cover the services and treatment that should be provided by primary care and community services, by local hospitals and, where appropriate, by specialist centres. Work is already under way on drawing up the framework for heart disease—led by Professor George Alberti, president of the Royal College of Physicians—and the framework for mental health, led by Professor Graham Thornicroft of the Maudsley hospital. A start has already been made on drawing up a national service framework for treatment and care of the elderly with the appointment of Professor Ian Philp from the university of Sheffield as chairman. The next framework will cover diabetes. All that effort is being put into ensuring that services in every part of the country are provided to a universally high standard. That is what the public want, what the professionals want and what the Government are determined to deliver.

As well as launching those initiatives, we shall change the law to place on each NHS trust a duty to promote and deliver top-quality services. Believe it or not, Mr. Deputy Speaker, trusts have no such duty at present; nor have they a duty to work in partnership with the rest of the NHS. In recent times, they have had a duty to compete with one another. We are changing that as well. To help each trust to deliver, we are also appointing a commission for health improvement to carry out periodic inspections, and to give help and advice to those whose performance needs to be improved.

Our modernisation of the system involves new, improved methods of setting standards and spreading best practice, new duties for trusts to deliver those standards, and a national body to ensure that they do. Those are all sensible, practical measures, welcomed by the professions. The Tories failed to introduce them, because such an approach could not be reconciled with the competitive internal market that they introduced—a market that set doctor against doctor and hospital against hospital, and was wasting a fortune in paperwork. In contrast, our proposals for modernising and streamlining the arrangements for primary care will cut bureaucracy. At present, nearly 4,000 fundholding practices and health authorities must negotiate annual contracts with NHS trusts. From April there will be just 481 primary care groups, which will be able to negotiate much longer-term arrangements. The result will be a massive drop in paperwork and bureaucracy.

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman said that the NHS was fair. He is now reading out a list of bureaucratic changes that he intends to make. Can he tell me what is fair about people being obliged to pay for treatment because they cannot receive it from the NHS—because the NHS simply cannot do it all? How will any of the measures that the right hon. Gentleman is describing address the fundamental problem that people are not receiving what they need from the NHS, and that for everyone who pays there is someone falling off the edge who cannot pay, and whom the right hon. Gentleman is letting down?

Mr. Dobson: I am sorry, but the right hon. Lady seems rather to have missed the point—something at which she is fairly smart. All the measures that I am describing are intended to ensure that the lottery system under which certain treatments and drugs are available in one part of the country but not in another is changed. That will enable us to get rid of the anomalies to which the right hon. Lady refers.

The boards of the primary care groups will involve not just local doctors but nurses, social services and lay people. I pay tribute to doctors and their representatives at the British Medical Association for agreeing to the change, which they have accepted because they believe that it is in the interests of their patients. If they did not believe that, they would not have accepted it.

All those changes should help to establish a much more comprehensive service in every part of the country, and generally raise the standard of treatment and care. That is because primary care groups provide incentives for all concerned to "level up" to the standards of the best. Considerable interest is being shown in the opportunity that we are providing for primary care groups to take more responsibilities, and to become primary care trusts. That shows that the changes we are making go with the grain of the more forward-thinking parts of the professions.

As well as changes in organisation, we have embarked on practical measures to improve service to the public in every part of the country. Perhaps the best example is NHS Direct. It is an entirely new service; it does not replace any existing services; it is new; it is additional; and it really works. We introduced NHS Direct in three pilot schemes in Newcastle, Preston and Milton Keynes. It is a nurse-led 24-hour helpline, which people can ring at any time of day or night. The nurses check what people say is wrong with them against protocols on a computer, and then reach professional decisions. Sometimes they call an emergency ambulance immediately; sometimes they make sure that people see their doctors; and, in many cases, they offer advice and reassurance. NHS Direct has been a brilliant success. It has already been extended to the west midlands, it will go on line in south-east London at the end of the month, and by April it should cover 20 million people. According to present plans, it should cover the whole country by next year. It is another practical measure to help patients and the NHS, and to provide a fairer and better spread of the service that the NHS provides.

Since we became the Government, there has been a large increase in the number of people turning to the NHS for treatment. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and

The Weald gave the impression that all those people were turning away and going to the private sector. More than 2.5 million more people are being treated this year than two years ago—just over 45,000 more people each week. That is why waiting lists fell by 150,000 between April and November last year.

All that is a result of a massive effort by the staff of the NHS—all the staff of the NHS. We inherited an NHS held back by a shortage of nurses and midwives, which was being made worse by the cuts that the last Government made in nurse training. If they had kept even to the level that prevailed at the time of the 1992 general election, 11,000 extra nurses would have been available to the NHS. We already have 2,500 extra people training as nurses, but it takes three years to train a nurse. We must try to attract back into nursing in the NHS some of the 140,000 qualified nurses who have left—and they have not left since we took office. That is why, unlike our Tory predecessors, we acknowledged to the pay review body that there was a shortage of nurses, which previous Governments had denied. We said that we believed that they should award high increases for the lower grades. I hope that that will mean a settlement that will help to retain the nurses whom we have, attract back some who have left, and persuade more young people to train as nurses.

Unlike the last Government, we are trying to introduce family-friendly employment policies, and have taken new measures to reduce the number of assaults on staff. Like the nurses themselves, we also want to change their pay and promotion structure. The present archaic grading system is rigid; it holds staff back. It needs to be changed to provide more flexibility and more opportunity for career progression. We want to sort out with the profession new ways of working that are good for staff as well as for patients. The same applies to hospital consultants. Contrary to the myth, most consultants work longer hours in the NHS than is strictly required by their contract. A small minority do not. The consultants want to renegotiate the contract; so do we, and we have started negotiating. We want a system that is better for both patients and doctors. I hope that we can get it. A modern NHS needs a modern pay system.

A modern NHS also needs a top-class information technology system. The Tory years in the NHS were littered with multi-million-pound scandals over computer systems that cost a fortune and never worked. We have launched a 10-year strategy, again with the support and welcome of the professions, to invest £750 million to provide the NHS with the IT system that it needs and deserves.

Subject to proper safeguards for confidentiality, we want an IT system where each patient's up-to-date, accurate health records are available at the touch of a button to his or her GP, to a district nurse, to a hospital or perhaps even on a laptop to a paramedic with an ambulance. That would save time and money and lead to much better and quicker treatment.

We want a system that can send test results from the laboratory to the hospital or GP in the blink of an eye. Up to now, all treatment has involved patients travelling to see the professional, or the professional travelling to see them—not any more. In some cases, people will get their scan done locally, while a specialist miles away can look at a screen and give immediate advice to the local doctor or nurse. All that will spread quicker and better practice.

There will be changes not just in relation to medical information. In future, we want people to be able to go to their GP and, from there, book an out-patient appointment if that is what the GP recommends. We are already carrying out some pilot schemes on booked admissions. The lessons will be learned and then the system will be extended nationally. It cannot be done overnight, but it can and will be done.

From next April, when the extra £21 billion starts to kick in, people will see an NHS that is getting better. It will not happen overnight, but it will happen—better-paid staff, new ways of working, new drugs, new treatments, new hospitals, new helplines, new accident and emergency departments, new booking systems, new quality standards, new screening systems, new strategies to reduce inequalities in health, new centres to give equal access to health care.

That will not mean that the resources for the NHS will be limitless. Priorities will still have to be set, but the quality of treatment and care will be raised and there will be a fairer, more standard share-out throughout the country. While the Tories yammer on about extending the private sector and about rationing, we will get on with the job of improving the health service.

5.23 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I do not think that the Government will be referred to any longer as one of style rather than substance because their style has seemed in tatters since we got back from the Christmas recess. That is revealing failures of substance.

There are two substantial policy areas where the Government are already getting into an important mess. The first is macro-economic policy, of which we will hear more in the coming year. The second is the national health service, which, after less than two years of Labour administration, is already coming under much greater pressure and facing bigger difficulties than most people in the service can remember for a long time. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has said, that is down to the folly of the Government and to the fact that they have wasted their first two years: they have lacked a proper policy and not faced up to what needs to be done.

The debate is short and my contribution must reflect that. I am happy to echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald said. Contrary to the sneering remarks of the Secretary of State for Health, the shadow Secretary of State happens to combine one of the more combative styles in the House with extremely intelligent content. She took what she described as a grown-up approach to the subject, which is what the public want us to do.

It simply will not do for the Secretary of State to reply by pretending that our criticisms are based on some secret desire to abolish the national health service. I am no more party to some sinister plot to that end with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) than is my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald. The fact is that every party wishes to see a better national health service.

The difficulty is that the Labour party came to power with no policy to achieve that. It gave the impression that its election would lead to substantial improvement without more ado. The Secretary of State is desperately trying to find some belief that improvement will come.

[Mr. Kenneth Clarke]

The Secretary of State has to get rid of two legacies from Labour's period in opposition. I do not think that he was shadowing health when we came to the election, so it is not his fault that he inherited no files, no policies, no proposals—nothing—but he sticks to the slogans for lack of anything else.

The Secretary of State appeared to believe when he was elected, and he still sometimes implies, that all the problems of the national health service could be solved if only more money were spent. It was clearly the position of the Labour party that the problems that the health service faced before the election were all caused by lower spending than Labour would achieve.

That is total nonsense. We are not looking backwards, but the previous Government always gave higher priority to the NHS than to any other service, as every Government are bound to do. We increased public spending on the service by 1 per cent. of gross domestic product during our period of office. The Labour Government will do that only if they flatten GDP in the next few years.

The Labour party followed up the clear impression that it gave that it was going to spend much more on the service to get it out of trouble with a peculiar approach to public spending in its first two years in office. It thought that it could blame us for the two-year squeeze to which the service has been subjected. It claims that it followed the public spending plans of its predecessors: it did not. It knows that, after the previous Government published each year's public spending plans, they never, in practice, stuck to the first figures that they pencilled in for years two and three of every three-year survey.

Under the previous Government, the public spending round always enhanced spending on the NHS—above what we had first proposed. It is water under the bridge now, but 18 months ago, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were telling the Labour Government that they would hit a crisis if they pretended to believe that they were simply spending what their predecessors would have spent. They did not even do that.

The Secretary of State sometimes points out that, in the end, the Government put in some extra money for winter pressures last year and so on, but the result was an increase in public spending that was pathetic compared with the expansion of previous years. One of the reasons why we are having a difficult winter, in a year when flu and other epidemics are not exceptional compared with other difficult years, is the fact that the health service has been subjected to a severe squeeze by the present Government in their first two years in office.

Now the Government have committed themselves—again inflexibly—to three years of increases in public expenditure that are not out of line with those that were afforded by the previous Government and that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald rightly said, are not as good as the best three years that we can point to in the 1990s.

Mr. Heppell: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: I will give way just once in my short speech.

Mr. Heppell: From the tone and content of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's speech, it seems that he is suggesting that the Government are not spending enough on health. How does that tie in with the remarks of Conservative Members in the Opposition Treasury Front-Bench team, who say that our spending plans are extravagant?

Mr. Clarke: I joined that debate and I never heard any Conservative Member say that we are spending too much on the NHS. I have joined attacks on the Treasury for the overall level of public spending plans because the Treasury has combined its desirable spending plans on health and education, where what it is achieving is not out of line with what we have achieved, with its failure to apply any strict priorities to other public spending, in line with economic reality. On health, the Government are getting back on track with the kind of increases in public spending that have become almost the norm, on average, for most of the years of the modern NHS.

I will not repeat—the point has been made well in the past week or two—the fact that the other damaging slogan that the Secretary of State stuck to was the ridiculous thing about the number of people on waiting lists. I tire of remembering the number of times that successive Conservative Secretaries of State pointed out to our opponents how fatuous it was to look at the number of people on waiting lists, as opposed to the length of time that people waited for serious treatment.

Not only did Labour use that as a litany in opposition, but it has stuck to it in office. It has distorted the activity of the health service. If we set perverse targets for those responsible for allocating resources, so that they have to speed up treatment of people with comparatively minor ailments when they are under great pressures of rising demand, the health service is that much less well able to deal with winter pressures. That is plainly one of the things that has happened.

The Secretary of State has to come back with the sort of defence that I have heard Secretaries of State use in the past: he says that, each week, 45,000 more people are being treated now than two years ago. We have had 18 years of Secretaries of State saying that—I should hope that they have been saying it.

Demand for national health service treatments is rising rapidly because of an aging population and advancing medical science. The previous Government put more money into the NHS, and the current Government are getting back on track in continuing the increases. If the current Government had not increased the number of patients being treated each week, they would have fallen far short of everything achieved by the previous Government. However, they are distorting priorities by focusing on waiting numbers, as opposed to the local priorities that would have been chosen by health authorities, GPs and trusts.

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has dwelt lovingly on the legacy that we inherited. Will he confirm that, until the NHS reforms that he introduced as Secretary of State for Health were implemented, NHS waiting lists had never risen above 1 million and that, since they were implemented, lists have never been below 1 million?

Mr. Clarke: The idea that my reforms to the NHS caused a sudden increase in referrals is an interesting one.

The numbers of people on waiting lists demonstrates the increasing age of the population and advances in the treatments available to the population. It demonstrates also the very varying referral patterns of individual general practitioners, some of whom are far more likely to refer than others. Some consultants are far more likely than others to receive patients.

The numbers on waiting lists are a measure of demand, but they are not a significant one. In the next year or two, numbers may go up or down, and it will have nothing to do with the Secretary of State or with the Government. It is silly to choose numbers as a measure. However, treatment priority and the length of time for which people wait is a very important measure, which we shall be examining.

Dr. Harris: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: I said that I would not give way, as I should otherwise speak for far too long.

I shall not engage in great debate with the Secretary of State on NHS reforms—as he has created the tremendous myth that he is abolishing them. Everyone in the NHS knows perfectly well that he is not abolishing the reforms—and breathing a great sigh of relief that he is not.

The previous Government never called the reforms an "internal market". In his speech, the Secretary of State was merely repeating the general election slogans—although he is now two years into responsibility for government—when he talked about "the Government getting rid of competition; being in favour of co-operation; sweeping away the internal market" and all that nonsense. Although he no longer says that simply reducing the costs of bureaucracy will reduce the numbers of people waiting for treatment, all the other slogans have been reproduced.

The Secretary of State is retaining from our reforms what, in the jargon, is called "the purchaser-provider divide". He is therefore retaining a means of dividing providers and those who decide on behalf of the public what treatments should be provided. Unfortunately, he is also inhibiting the providers' choice of where and how service is provided. However, he is retaining the essential elements of choice.

The Secretary of State is retaining—it sounds like he might even make greater use of it—the practice of clinical audit and many other features of our reforms. One of the best boasts that he can make is about the new hospitals that will be opening. He is able to make that boast because he stuck with the private finance initiative, which was denounced by his predecessor as health spokesman when Labour was in opposition. The Secretary of State is now taking credit for new hospitals being produced by implementing a policy that his colleagues fought like mad when they were in opposition. I appreciate why that point should make him raise his eyebrows above his beard, which is much better than mine. Nevertheless, I am grateful for that policy U-turn—he will have to make others.

Rationing is relevant to whether reforms are being made in the NHS, and the public could not care less whether they are Labour reforms or Conservative reforms. The public want a system that functions fairly in response to the ever-changing demands made on it by a modern society.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald rightly said, rationing exists in every health care system in the world, and is more usually described as a way of making difficult choices, deciding priorities and allocating resources so that they have the greatest effect. The health service must aim to meet every need, but it will never meet every demand, and no health service can. It will help people to understand the difficulty of the term "rationing" if we make it clear that we are talking about how to match finite resources with infinite demand, to ensure that the most important needs are satisfied. Currently, many important needs are going unsatisfied, as our constituents and the press tell us daily.

The Secretary of State is making the big mistake of replacing some of the autonomy given to individual practices and trusts by—as hon. Members have already said—a raft of commissions and advisory bodies and the great committee structure of primary care groups. The nomenclature does not matter, as the groups may boldly go on to be known as primary care trusts and to have even more responsibility. The Government are introducing bureaucracy into a system that needed further improvement; the improvement that was needed was to give individual practices even more control over the resources at their disposal to meet the needs of their patients, allowing greater local autonomy to prevail.

The Government have swept away fundholding, simply because they opposed it. They had the slogan of opposition to a two-tier system. I shall simply cite the survey of health authorities and trusts, conducted last year by the National Association of Fundholding Practices, delivering their verdict on fundholding being swept away. The survey asked whether authorities and trusts believed that practice-based budgets should continue, to which 72 per cent. said yes and 21 per cent. said no. It asked whether they believed that fundholders had made improvements to services, to which 88 per cent. said yes and 2 per cent. said no. It asked whether the actions of fundholders have resulted in improvements for all patients, to which 53 per cent. said yes and 37 per cent. said no. It asked whether authorities found it easier to create change with fundholders or non-fundholders, to which 51 per cent. said that it was easier with fundholders and only 2 per cent. said that it was easier with non-fundholders.

Fundholders have been swept away by dogma, replaced by committees which I hope will work. I do not want the system to grind to a halt in my constituency or anywhere else. However, it is folly to think that committees of 33-odd people—comprising doctors, nurses and laymen but excluding other professions—can reach agreement on an enormous budget, for a locality in which many GPs will wish not to become involved and in which there will be huge disagreements between committee members. The plan will cause rigidity in the system. Our reforms needed to evolve and to be improved, and the commissioning and purchasing side of the system had to be strengthened, providing more power to the elbow of individual GPs.

Miss Kirkbride: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Clarke: I am sorry that I cannot give way to my hon. Friend, with whom I am sure I agree. I should like to deal with one point that she dealt with—the matter of beta-interferon and multiple sclerosis.

[Mr. Clarke]

The Secretary of State already has too many central initiatives. He is slipping back into initiatives for this and that, holding back too much money and trying to run the service by press release rather than by giving greater control to GPs and the NHS. However, he is running away entirely from some difficult issues, which are matters not of local priorities but of clinical opinion.

Such a matter is whether beta-interferon is effective and cost-effective in the treatment of multiple sclerosis. On that, the Secretary of State has said that people should get the treatment if their consultant advises receiving it, while ignoring the fact that in no part of the country does that rule prevail. In my constituency, just as in Bromsgrove, some patients receive it when their consultant recommends it, but others do not because the allocated budget is not large enough.

I have a letter from the chief medical officer saying that the treatment is not satisfactory, that improvements to the quality of life are not sustained, and that more work has to be done. The leading consultant neurologist in my part of the world does not believe that. He believes that published material now shows that the quality of life of patients can be improved. Local spending priorities cannot determine that clinical matter.

We cannot have people saying that we believe one set of clinical advice in Preston, but not in Nottingham. Clear professional guidance from the centre is required. This is a difficult matter that presents hard choices. No rulings have been made on the matter, and the Secretary of State has been only too content to leave it to local health authorities, for them to wrestle with their budgets and to contend with the lobbies. It is an unsatisfactory situation. I do not think that any of the Secretary of State's proposals on the problem will ease it or the many other problems like it in the NHS across the United Kingdom.

I urge the Secretary of State to accept, after two years, that he is no longer in opposition, that it is inadequate to continue to fight the previous general election, and that most of the slogans used in the election were silly and were produced by people who had done little to prepare themselves to meet the demands of the national health service. The slogans are quite valueless when applied to the problems faced by the NHS in the first difficult winter under this Government.

The amounts of money that the Secretary of State will provide will be more satisfactory from next April onwards, and more in line with the increases made by the previous Government in the early 1990s. I do not have any confidence that he has the first idea of how to apply sums intelligently. He is responding to pressures, repeating political slogans and facing each headline and winter as they come along, trying to do the best with what he has, to persuade everyone that the service is getting better. The NHS requires clearer policy than that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald is to be commended on urging him to produce one, to give some serious thought to the problem and to stop thrashing about, as he has been doing, putting the NHS into crisis.

5.40 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) began by saying that the flu problems that the NHS has faced in recent weeks were not exceptional. That may be true in his part of the country, but in the north-west of England and in Yorkshire we have had some serious difficulties. I did not realise how bad things were—despite my entire constituency office staff of three people going down with the bug—until I saw my local newspaper for the first week of January. Reports of deaths normally occupy two or three columns, but for that week they stretched to two full pages. That shows the severity of the crisis that the NHS has faced. My neighbour, who is a nurse in the local hospital, told me that on her ward—one ward alone—10 people were absent. One of those was on maternity leave, but the rest were down with flu. We should not underestimate how serious the problem has been.

Today's debate is on an Opposition motion. I believe in the importance of constructive opposition in a democracy. I have the privilege of chairing the Health Committee, in which some excellent Opposition Members play a constructive role. In the past three weeks, the Opposition, led by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and her colleagues, have been opportunistic and destructive. Her comments today about bodies placed in refrigerated lorries—

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): It is true.

Mr. Hinchliffe: It may be true, but what do health managers do when faced with the scenario that I have described, with so many deaths that the reports cover two full pages in my local newspaper? What do they do when people are dying and there is no way of dealing with it? I praise NHS staff for the work that they have done in recent weeks in my area and elsewhere, despite the negative comments that we have heard from the Opposition today and throughout the Christmas and new year period.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe talked about the intelligent content of his colleague's comments from the Opposition Front Bench. I must have blinked, because I did not notice any intelligent comments. I have listened carefully to the Opposition's policies and arguments since the election. In debates and at endless Question Times we have heard attack after attack from the Opposition Front Bench on the Government's failure to meet their waiting list target. When the Government start to meet their waiting list target, all of a sudden the Opposition shift their tack and say that the crisis in the NHS over Christmas is the fault of the waiting list initiative. I am sorry, but we made an electoral pledge, rightly or wrongly. The people to whom I made that pledge have a right to evaluate whether we are meeting it. I am pleased that the Government are doing so—and doing so well.

What would the Conservatives have done? I have listened carefully to what the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe believes to be the constructive comments from the Opposition Front Bench. The only proposal that we have heard from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald is to put people into the private sector. That is the only answer that the Tories have to the current problems in the NHS.

I asked the right hon. Lady a relevant question. I acknowledge that we have staffing problems in the NHS. I have done the rounds with other colleagues on the Select

Committee, meeting nursing staff, doctors, ancillary workers and others employed by the NHS to find out their thoughts on the current staffing level problems. One thing has come over loud and clear: we are short of nurses. Many wards are desperately short of nurses. One reason for that is that many nurses have gone to the private sector. The right hon. Lady's answer to the problems of the NHS—the crisis, as some are calling it—is to get people into the private sector. The increased demand in the private sector will draw ever more nursing staff and doctors from the NHS. What nonsense. Is that the best that she can do after 18 or 19 months in opposition? It is disgraceful.

The Select Committee will soon be reporting on the regulation of the private sector. In the evidence that we have taken so far from people in the private sector and outside, we have heard serious concerns about the quality of care that it provides. The right hon. Lady might want to reflect on why the quality of care in the private sector is so much worse than that in the NHS.

Miss Widdecombe: I am on record as having said for some time that the private sector should be regulated. If it is to play an expanded role, it must be regulated. I have called on the Secretary of State to consider that, because those in the private sector tell me that when they raise the issue with him, he will not meet them because he says that he has nothing to do with the private sector.

Mr. Dobson: They are liars.

Mr. Hinchliffe: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have many things in common. We use the same pork pie shop in Yorkshire, as may be apparent. I support him ideologically in many ways because he believes in the NHS and its ethos, as I do. The right hon. Lady did not respond to my intervention—*[Interruption.]* She intervenes on me, then talks to her colleagues when I am responding. I wanted to know her response to my important point about her key policy initiative of moving people into the private sector. What would the impact be on nursing staff levels in the NHS?

Miss Widdecombe: I was talking with my colleagues because we thought—we may have been mistaken—that we heard the Secretary of State call those in the private sector liars. If he did, I am sure that those concerned will be interested to read that.

The hon. Gentleman has so vastly misunderstood my policy that I cannot put him right in the space of an intervention. A nurse is trained to nurse. Is it less valid for her to assist someone who happens to have paid for their operation than to assist someone who has not?

Mr. Hinchliffe: This is the third time that I have put my point to the right hon. Lady, but she has not responded. My central point is that if she wants to push people into the private sector, she must accept that nursing and medical staff in the private sector will come from the national health service. She would worsen the circumstances of people in the national health service. That is her policy and it is disgraceful.

Dr. Harris *rose—*

Mr. Hinchliffe: I have given way several times. I want to carry on because there are others who want to speak.

The right hon. Lady's other policy, presumably, is to return to the anarchy of the internal market. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe plays down the anarchy of the internal market. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I appeal to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who has already made a significant contribution to the debate.

Mr. Hinchliffe: The right hon. Lady wants to return to the competitive, cut-throat environment of hospital versus hospital and doctor versus doctor. I am proud that the Government are abolishing the internal market and getting back to basics in the NHS.

I commend the Government on a range of initiatives. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State can be proud of the impact that the investment that he has managed to win for the NHS is having in areas such as mine and the contribution that it has made to easing the serious problems that we have faced over the past few weeks. However, I am sure that he agrees that money is not the only issue. No one has said that it is just about money. How the money is used is important.

I have taken a close interest in the NHS over many years. I was concerned about the gross waste of scarce resources caused by the internal market. The Government are getting back to investing money in patient care. I welcome the abolition of the internal market, the way in which the Government are putting the fragments back together and the new statutory duty of partnership that the new Bill will introduce when it comes before us in the next few months.

I welcome the way in which the Government have launched the winter pressure initiative. Members of the Select Committee have seen excellent examples in various parts of the country of people working together to address the difficulties in the NHS and social services, and numerous positive initiatives have alleviated the acute difficulties that have faced the NHS in recent weeks.

I want to address one or two areas where positive developments are needed within the NHS under the new Labour Government. Recent experience has shown that, as a matter of urgency, we must address staffing levels because, at ward level, there is simply no slack in the system. If—as in the case in which my neighbour was involved—a ward has 10 people away for various reasons, there will be serious difficulties. We must build some slack into the system.

We must look at how we ensure that nurses are attracted back to the NHS. It is partly about pay, but it is not just pay—as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has recognised. A range of issues concern nursing and NHS staff over and above pay, and I hope that the Government will address those in the next few weeks and months.

I would like to see substantial changes in primary care. In my part of the world, constituents have attempted to contact their GPs over the Christmas and new year period. Obviously, the GP surgeries have not been working and people have had difficulty accessing advice and help. I recognise that NHS Direct will make a substantial contribution to solving those difficulties. However, it concerned me that many of those who have tried to get hold of the deputising services in my part of the world

[Mr. Hinchliffe]

have been told that there would be a five or six-hour wait for the service. They have, therefore, presented themselves to accident and emergency units, causing great stress in the hospital sector—stress that could be resolved by more flexible primary care arrangements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate)—a GP—is looking at me and I know that he works hard, as do many GPs who deserve their holidays. However, it is possible, with the provision of primary care groups, to ensure that we create different arrangements over holiday periods so that people can access GPs to get a basic prescription and do not need to present themselves to accident and emergency units.

It will not surprise Ministers that I want to raise my concerns about the need for further improvements in the relationship between the NHS and social services. The Select Committee produced a report last week which may or may not meet with the approval of Ministers—but I hope that they will listen to some of the points that the Committee picked up.

One key area, with direct relevance to the kind of problems that we faced over Christmas, is the way in which one element of local authority or health services does not recognise the impact of expenditure on another element, so that additional money spent in one sector can impact on saving more money in another sector. I welcome the way in which the Government are moving towards pooled budgets, but they should look seriously at the way in which charges for domiciliary care and care in the community are preventing people from releasing and making available acute beds. That factor must be analysed in detail by the Department of Health.

The picture that we on the Select Committee get, and that I get personally, is that there are tremendous experiences of joint working across the country. Staff want to work together, but—in many areas—are prevented from doing so by the current statutory framework.

In conclusion, I recognise that we have made great progress, and I do not recognise the picture presented by the Opposition. There are many achievements of which the Government can be proud in the short time that we have been in power. We can debate rationing, waiting lists and waiting times—the shorthand for what is happening in the NHS—until the cows come home. However, the key issues of health—morbidity, illness and mortality—are not even mentioned in either the Tory motion or the Liberal Democrat amendment.

I am pleased that the Government are addressing fundamental public health questions of the kind to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred—such as why poorer people are often more ill than others. The Government are doing something about that, and they can be proud of their policies and their results. I wish the Government well in their future initiatives.

5.55 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): This debate was triggered when, at the last Health Question Time before Christmas, the Minister for Public Health came up with the unequivocal statement—as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said in her introductory speech—that there was no rationing in the NHS.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, has just said that there are other hugely important issues, especially concerning the quality of care. However, today we have, quite rightly in our view, taken one of the issues that has underlain the health service throughout its existence, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) stated. We are trying to tease out of the Government, and the Secretary of State, the admission which everybody outside knows is true—namely, that there is rationing, and that it is nothing to be ashamed of. Only if we get past our initial hesitation at using the "R" word can we have an honest debate.

The Minister for Public Health is in her place. She, together with the Secretary of State and her ministerial colleagues, must accept that it is no good coming to the House with an amendment to a Conservative motion that does not deal with the point of the motion—nor with the amendment that my party tabled, which accepts the proposition in the motion.

From the moment that the Government came to office, and during the whole 18 years of the previous Administration, it has been understood that one of the biggest and growing issues in the NHS has been how, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said, we reconcile growing needs with the resources that might be available at any one time.

We have very little difference on the general thrust of the Conservative motion, as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, but we do have four detailed points of difference. The right hon. Lady has heard me say before that I always welcome conversions, and we observe the fact that Tory Front Benchers have converted—they are now owning up to the fact that there is rationing, something the previous Conservative Administration never did. I appeared with the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), her predecessor as Opposition spokesman, when he was Secretary of State for Health, in television studios before the last election—together with the then Labour spokesman, the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith). Never did the word "rationing" pass their lips. The Conservative conversion is welcome.

We do not want to be overly critical of the national institute for clinical excellence and the commission for health improvement, the bodies that the Government are proposing—which we will debate, no doubt, in the health Bill later this year. However, we certainly do not think that, suddenly, they will be the answer. Unless, once they have formed a view, they are given the power to impose that view, all they will do is give advice, recommendations and suggestions—the rationing decisions will still be left to the practitioners. Do they use a drug costing £1,000, or not? Do they treat seven people, or one? Do they carry out this or that practice, or not? We have not heard from the Government whether they will make the NICE recommendations compulsory. If they do, the Government could then accept the ownership of the decisions, which would be much fairer on the practitioners—the people in the front line, or, as people always describe them, the gateway to the NHS.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) gave the example of a number of people who purchase expensive drugs for themselves because they are not available to

them through the NHS. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that rationing will inevitably lead to two classes of patient in this country—those who can afford to buy drugs in the private sector and those who cannot? Does he accept that rationing will mean that people cannot access services? Does he accept that the fact that implicit rationing is occurring in certain areas does not absolve the Conservative party of the responsibility for bringing us to this situation?

Mr. Hughes: I would happily spend a lot of time criticising the previous Administration, but it is not productive—the Labour party is in government, and constructive opposition is about trying to make the Government do what is right.

Mr. Efford: Answer the question.

Mr. Hughes: I can easily answer the question. There is a huge amount of rationing now. The former Minister of State—now the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), who was recently promoted to the Cabinet—effectively admitted that in the autumn, when he said that one of the objectives of the Government was to make sure that, in future, someone in one part of the country would not have a request for treatment turned down which would be granted in another part of the country.

Rationing by postcode is general in many areas of life. My mother, who lives in Hereford, told me a few years ago that she was told by someone at the local eye hospital that she would have to wait for a year or a year and a half for a simple cataract operation, with the prospect of deteriorating eyesight. The same person told her that if she was willing to pay she could have the operation tomorrow. There is a two-tier health service: the 13 per cent. with private health care can generally buy their care tomorrow.

When, in the past, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), a general practitioner, was an outside adviser on health to our party, we argued that we could end the two-tier health service only by working out what it was necessary to make the NHS do everywhere in order to give everyone the same access to treatment.

Dr. Brand: This morning, I met two simple examples of rationing. A man who had very imperfect cosmetic surgery carried out on the NHS now has to wait 14 months before seeing a consultant about a revision operation. That is rationing—the man, who is on benefit, cannot go to work until that work has been carried out, so he has to go privately.

I saw a man of 62 who desperately needs Viagra—as does his wife. I have been told that I am not allowed to prescribe it under the NHS, so I broke my terms and conditions of service this morning by issuing a private prescription, to save him the expense of having to see another doctor privately for exactly the same service.

Those are clear examples of rationing and of a lack of guidance to the poor sods such as myself who have to meet not the demands, but the needs of patients.

Mr. Hughes: In our previous NHS debate just last week, the Secretary of State called my hon. Friend an hon. and learned colleague, because he is a general practitioner. I hope that Ministers will learn the lesson that he teaches today. I hope that next week, if not this week, Ministers will acknowledge the self-evident truth that there is rationing in the health service, just as the Secretary of State earlier acknowledged the self-evident truth that there was a crisis and a staff shortage in the health service. Then, we could get on with the debate.

Mr. Efford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No; I have already given way once to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Dobson: Under his definition of rationing, can the hon. Gentleman name anything that anyone wants that is not rationed?

Mr. Hughes: The Secretary of State drew a comparison with education, which he said was rationed, but the reality is that, for those of school age who require education, it is not rationed. Schools and classes are available, so the situation is completely different.

Mr. Dawson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No, I am dealing with the Secretary of State's point.

The reality is that the positions in health and in education are not comparable. At the moment, the patient to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight referred could not get the treatment he needed, just as my mother could not. I have constituents with multiple sclerosis who cannot get treatment. That is rationing. It is not the same in other walks of life. There is a difference between what one needs—to be cured, so as to be able to get back to work and pay taxes, thus contributing rather than drawing from the state—and what might be desirable extras.

The rather academic and cautious beginning to the Secretary of State's speech did not draw the right parallels. We are talking about treatments that the national health services acknowledges people need for their good health, but that are not available at all, are available only after a year or two or three, or are available in place A but not in place B.

Dr. Harris: The Government take the limited view that either there is no rationing at all or everything in the world is rationed. The British Medical Association, the King's Fund, the health economics departments at York and Birmingham, the Patients Association and every political party other than the Labour party recognise the truth—the Government are sticking to their point in splendid isolation.

Mr. Hughes: That is true. I challenge the Secretary of State to do what I did this morning: I went to my filing cabinet and, looking back only two years, I turned up cutting after cutting from professional bodies and reputable journalists making the case about rationing.

In 1996, the BMA held debates entitled "Hard Choices in Health Care" and "Rationing and Rights in Health Care". The latter was initiated by the Institute for Public Policy Research, a think tank that the Government recognise as valid. In March 1998, *The Daily Telegraph* said:

"Test-tube baby choice depends on your postcode."

[Mr. Hughes]

The Independent said:

"MS sufferers denied costly 'wonder drug' . . . People with MS still face a postcode lottery on new treatments. The situation is unfair and unacceptable."

Chris Ham, a very well-known health expert, wrote about the case of child B and said that the issues involved were oversimplified.

Every health journal, almost every month, provides an example. Viagra was the most controversial and topical instance last year. A couple of months ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) introduced a debate about audiology services in the health service, which are unavailable in some places. They are not high-profile services, but for the deaf or hard of hearing they matter a great deal. Everyone outside the House is calling on us to face up to the issue and do something about it.

Clearly, there is and always has been rationing. There are many relevant examples showing rationing by delay, by cost—through prescription or other charges—or by unavailability, as with in-vitro fertilisation or treatment for MS sufferers. No amount of clinical effectiveness institutes, health improvement commissions or primary care groups will alter that fact. Indeed, the primary care groups are worried that, in the future, they will have to carry the burden of the decisions on rationing.

The King's Fund, a very reputable organisation, published a report using figures from the British social attitudes survey, which showed that in 1983, 29 per cent. of people supported limiting the NHS to people on low incomes while 64 per cent. opposed it, but that by 1996 the number of people supporting a safety-net-only service had gone down. Most people want a comprehensive health service and they want the Government to face up to questions about what should be included in it and how it should be funded.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman justifiably invokes public opinion. Is he aware that the King's Fund and the relevant economist at the York university centre for health economics calculate not only that primary care groups will probably be ineffective, but that they will cost £150 million?

Mr. Hughes: I am being tempted away from the issue of rationing. To replace the present structure with primary care groups certainly will not have a nil cost and they will have their own bureaucracy. There will always be a management cost for the health service, but I do not want to get into the debate about whether the present structure is better than what the Government intend to implement. I want rather to concentrate on the fact that we must get over the hurdle, or blockage, in the Government's mind that is preventing us from taking a long-term view.

The Government have admitted that the NHS is in crisis, but we are not being truthful about the whole story until we accept the other half of the equation. Just as health service pay is rationed—it will be rationed by the present Government, as it has been by every previous Government and will be by every future Government—so drugs and treatment are rationed. There is an equation between the money that goes into the kitty and the service that can be delivered.

I was not surprised by a briefing from the BMA for this debate that I received on Friday. It was blunt about the hard choice that the House and the Government will have to face. It said:

"The Government face two options . . . if the public and politicians want a comprehensive health service, with everything available on the NHS, the Government must provide considerably more resources to the NHS, over and above the Comprehensive Spending Review Allocation."

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe used to be Health Secretary and what he said was absolutely right. We have done the figures: the amount of money that his Government devoted to the NHS always went up, and the Conservatives always provided more than predicted in the spending plans. As a result, this Government's announcement of an extra £21 billion will mean that only £1 billion extra a year will be available, compared with the final spending plans drawn up by the previous Administration.

Mr. Hinchliffe: What would you do?

Mr. Hughes: The Government must respond to the public demand for a debate about what the NHS should do. They must not act in a way that no doctor ever would in response to a patient: they must not say, "I see you're ill, oh health service. I'm terribly sorry, but I'll come back in two years with a remedy. I won't do anything for the time being because some inherited rule says we can't treat the problem immediately."

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was right in her identification of the great problem which has been compounded by the Government. They came to office promising to save the NHS in 14 days—that looked a bit optimistic even to the most naive people—but then they phased the first pay award, which had a wonderful effect on morale. People left the health service because of this Government's actions; that did not happen only under the previous Administration.

Moreover, the Government inherited the Tories' spending plans and kept to them for two years.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: Let me finish the point. There was a bit of extra money—

Mr. Dobson: Twice as much as you promised.

Mr. Hughes: Not twice as much as that, which in any case was considerably more than the Government had suggested would be provided. The Government kept to the Tory spending plans until last July, and now have provided just about enough money, for the final three years of the Parliament, to allow the NHS to keep its head above water.

The Cabinet will study the pay review body's report in 10 days' or two weeks' time. I suspect that the decision will be made behind closed doors and will not be brought to Parliament for endorsement. Even if the Cabinet do not phase the award—

Mr. Dobson: There are no Liberals in the Cabinet.

Mr. Hughes: No, that is true, and the Government might face a really hard time if there were.

When the Cabinet studies the review, I hope that it will not do what the Tories sometimes did on similar occasions. They used to say, "Fine, you can have a big pay rise, but it's all got to be funded out of existing resources and the money that has already been allocated." That tactic meant that people might be paid more, but the money available elsewhere in the health service fell.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is a need for a mature debate about health, but does he recall the publication last autumn of a new Liberal Democrat consultation document on the subject? That document contained no costings and it appears that none will be supplied until just before the next general election. How can my constituents believe that the hon. Gentleman really wants a mature debate when he is not even prepared to attach financial costs to his plans?

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman has not been in the House long, so I do not criticise him if he is not aware that we have costed every alternative Budget that we have produced since my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) has been our Treasury spokesman. We costed every item in our manifesto before the election. In our conference health service debate last year, members of the Liberal Democrat party accepted that rationing existed in the NHS and that the right way forward was to define what the NHS does, work out how much it costs and then decide how to pay for it.

We have never ruled out raising taxation or abolishing prescription charges and other charges. The Labour Government should be a bit braver and respond more to the public mood. They should understand that people feel deceived and disappointed by two years of hesitancy, with NHS staff still so badly paid. If the Government were to realise that what we propose is in accord with what people want, perhaps they would not be in such difficulty over the matter.

Finally, I can tell the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald—and those who speak on health in this House for all the other parties from all over the country—that the Liberal Democrats stand ready to implement the offer that I made to the Secretary of State. We believe that, in health as in other areas of public life, there should be a debate outside this House. That debate should involve professionals in the service, not just politicians and patients.

A forum should be established in which the long-term future of the health service is debated. The late John Smith set up the Borrie commission—not on a narrow partisan basis—to look at social justice issues. The present Government have just announced a royal commission on the future of the other place. That is a proper way to gather opinion from all other sources.

We believe that such consultation should be conducted about the health service. I hope that, in the near future, the Secretary of State will respond with two announcements to today's call for a mature debate. First, he must admit that rationing exists; and secondly, he should promise that the health service of the future will be built on the views and experience of all concerned. In that way, perhaps, he can ensure that the pressure of so many crises in the health service can be alleviated, and that patients and staff who feel that too little progress has been made after two years of a Labour Government will no longer be so disillusioned.

6.15 pm

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): As this is an Opposition day debate, it is entirely appropriate to contrast 18 months of this Government with 18 years of the previous Administration. Sometimes it gets forgotten that the Conservatives had 18 years in which to fix the national health service. Throughout that period, they had to persuade the public continually that the service was safe in their hands. People drew the usual inference from such continual persuasion: they were not convinced that the NHS was safe in the Tories' hands.

The legacy left by the Tory Government to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his colleagues on the Front Bench is not in dispute, even—I am sure—by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). That legacy was one of underfunding and low staff morale: it included an internal market more concerned with ideology than patient care and so obscene that it ended up costing the taxpayer billions of pounds in money spent on bureaucracy rather than on improving patient care.

The suspicion will always linger that the Opposition's agenda for the national health service—evidenced in debates such as this about rationing—is one of undermining public confidence as a precursor to arguing for privatisation. Tory Members may claim that that description is too dramatic, but we should remember what they did to community care and to dentistry—they privatised both, saying that there was no other option.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lewis: Not yet. If the Tories had been allowed to continue undermining the health service, I have no doubt that further privatisations would have followed. That would have been entirely consistent. Whenever this debate is held, the House should remember that Conservative Members are the most passionate advocates—and users—of the private health care system. Such people clearly have an interest in privatising more of the NHS.

The debate about rationing is another attempt to persuade the public that the NHS cannot be expected to meet their needs and to prevent people from having any great expectations of the service. That deliberate attempt to undermine public confidence is in clear contrast to the Government's approach. The Government have made massive extra investment in the health service, in return for its modernisation so that it is fit for the 21st century. They have not just thrown money at the problem, nor have they repeated the same old mistakes that have been made before. They have made the money available, and in return have demanded an improved quality of care.

The Government have committed themselves to an extra £21 billion in investment in the health service. People who talk about the private finance initiative should recall that the Tory PFI hospital building programme never got off the ground. Since this Government came to power, they have built hospital after hospital.

Waiting lists are falling. That was a clear election commitment, and the Government will be able to demonstrate at the next general election that that pledge has been met. The Government are also tackling the problem of clinical accountability, and not before time. For 18 years, general practitioners and hospital doctors

[Mr. Lewis]

were allowed to be laws unto themselves, but the Government have said that that must come to an end. The Government have promised, where clinicians do not deliver the quality of care that we expect and need, that they will act in the interests of patients.

Primary care groups have replaced divisive GP fundholding, and health action zones will ensure a more cohesive and integrated approach to the delivery of health and social care. All relevant agencies—health services, social services and other local authority services, along with the voluntary sector—are co-operating in the treatment of patients and in the introduction of an ambitious public health strategy for the first time in this country. That is very important.

Some Labour Members would like the Government to go one step further, in line with the recent Health Committee report on the relationship between health and social services. The report states that:

"the problems of collaboration between health and social services will not be properly resolved until there is an integrated health and social care system".

At least health action zones are a step in the right direction.

Health problems cannot be solved within the Department of Health or by Health Ministers alone; there is a broader agenda. Social exclusion policies will tackle the root causes of poverty, family breakdown and, ultimately, ill health. Gone are the futile policies of the Conservative Government, who did not merely ignore but denied the link between poverty and ill health.

Mr. Bercow: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not chunter on about primary care groups without first troubling to do his homework on their cost. Will he tell the House what he estimates to be the additional annual cost to the NHS budget that is created by the establishment of primary care groups?

Mr. Lewis: We are talking about significantly reducing bureaucracy, and devolving power and resources from health authorities down to GPs and the people who are closest to patients. It is nonsense to talk about extra costs when the policy is designed to reorganise the way in which money is spent in the health service and to ensure that it is spent more cost effectively and as close to the patient as possible. There can be no doubt that the overall objective of the Labour Government's health reforms is to achieve a significant reduction in the money spent on bureaucracy, which will allow money to be redirected to patient care.

The Government cannot turn around overnight 18 years of neglect and undermining, and no one—neither the public nor health care professionals—expects them to do that. Our objective is to be able to face the British people at the next election and say that we have not only met our pre-election pledges on the health service but have considerably surpassed the objectives we set ourselves before the election to modernise the NHS. We do not want merely to claim that the NHS is safe in our hands, for the NHS is the embodiment of all that the Labour party believes in. The Labour party created the NHS and it is entirely appropriate that the Labour party is charged with the responsibility of modernising it.

6.22 pm

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): Rationing exists in the national health service. In a cash-limited system, it cannot but exist and it is sheer folly to suggest that it does not. Rationing has existed since the health service began, with general practitioners controlling access to services and treatments, and hospitals manipulating their waiting lists. Demand has always outstripped resources and provision. The words spoken in the House by the Minister for Public Health when she said that rationing simply does not exist within the NHS must hang heavily, like an albatross around her neck. The Health Committee, of which I was Chairman for five years, recognised the existence of rationing in its inquiries into priority setting in the NHS. It produced reports on the drugs budget and on purchasing in 1994 and 1995, so this is not the first time that such issues have been debated.

The Conservative Government recognised the bottomless pit of demand and used the reforms of the 1990s to address it. They created a fundholding system that put GPs at the centre, providing care for a population they knew. It enabled GPs to set priorities and to identify those in greatest need, and so provided a bespoke health care service that was sensitive to the individual. Resources could be used flexibly and cost effectively, so many more patients could receive care. As a result of Conservative policy, many more staff were employed. The Conservative Government concentrated on waiting times, not on waiting lists, and in less than four years, they reduced from more than nine months to less than four months the average time that patients had to wait before being admitted to hospital. Sadly, that good work is being undone and patients now wait ever longer for admission.

We now have a Government who, with the greatest respect, are deceitful and duplicitous: they deny that rationing exists while taking steps to conceal the shortcomings of their own policies. There is cynical manipulation of patients through the waiting list money being hurled at the system by the Secretary of State. Waiting lists are the tap that turns health care on and off, but under the current system, there is no logical method for selecting patients from the waiting list. Managers rearrange cases so that if the Government want a number of patients treated, they get that number of patients treated, often without consideration being given to the severity of patients' condition or the distress that failure to be selected may cause.

A facile scattergun approach has been adopted—one that takes no account of the time that people spend waiting and fails to recognise that need should be the key determinant of care. In the pool of patients waiting to be fished out for treatment, Government initiatives encourage the rescue of those in shallow water—the patients most easily treated, who occupy a bed for the shortest time—to ensure rapid turnover. The patients in the deepest water are often left longest and some drown while waiting.

How have the Government approached the problem of infinite demand and finite resources? They have come up with primary care groups, which are a rag bag of ideas, hastily cobbled together. They force GPs to relinquish personalised care and give up valuable clinical time to undertake management roles for which they are neither trained nor enthusiastic. They are inadequately funded,

rely on good will for their operation and are supplied with a mass of guidance—often contradictory—within which to operate.

Let us take health service circular 1998/139, entitled "Developing Primary Care Groups". Paragraph 52 states:

"The ability to offer patients the individual care they require has been and remains the cornerstone of general practice. The new system will continue to allow individual GPs to decide what is best for the patient, whether, for example, to prescribe drugs or refer patients to hospitals in the light of their clinical judgment. The freedom to refer and prescribe remains unchanged."

The best bit is:

"Patients will continue to be guaranteed the drugs, investigations and treatments they need".

The Government are clearly saying that there is to be no rationing—but wait, what about the next paragraph?

Paragraph 53 states:

"Primary care groups will be expected to live within their budgets. Where a group is forecasting an overspend it must work with its host health authority to manage the position in-year".

So, there is to be rationing after all, with guidance telling GPs, "Give patients whatever they need, but don't spend money doing it." What a devious philosophy. We know that more than one third of health authorities are overspent.

Only a confused Government bent on folly could believe that rationing could be abolished and money saved by fragmenting the service, destroying management and delegating the operation of the system to inexperienced doctors. Already the evidence is beginning to appear. The Government suggest that inequity must be tackled by levelling up, but what is really happening? The first decisions made by fledgling PCGs are to scrap in-house clinics to save money and to reduce GP practices' drug budgets to save money. That is not levelling up; it is dumbing down.

Survey after survey of medical professionals shows conclusively that rationing is preventing patients from getting the care they need. Only last week, a survey in *Doctor* magazine revealed a damning indictment of the Government's policies and made a laughing stock of their denials. Of respondents, 97 per cent. believe that rationing is inevitable, 79 per cent. say that services or treatment have been withdrawn and 20 per cent. said that patients had suffered as a result of rationing; most serious is the fact that one in 20 said that patients had died as a result. In my constituency, infertility treatment is a thing of the past, plastic surgery is extremely difficult to obtain and even hip pain is no longer an indicator for a joint replacement.

We do not need denials of rationing: we need a fair and effective mechanism for managing rationing. We need mature debate, not meaningless rhetoric. We do not need the Government's retreat to the magical, mystical modernisation fund which they claim will do so much, yet has been spent five times over in successive health circulars. The health professions recognise it and the public accept it: the evidence is clear. When citizens' juries, focus groups and individuals are presented with the facts, they can understand complex medical and case-mix issues. They can arrive at sensible decisions about who gets what.

Rationing is not a job for managers: they do not have the knowledge and it invites public disapprobation. GPs may be the best option, but they are increasingly uncomfortable with that demand. The *Doctor* magazine survey showed that 80 per cent. of doctors recognise that rationing is a cause of friction between them and their patients. Increasing complexity makes decisions more difficult, and many doctors say that that is not why they entered the medical profession. Other GPs may use rationing as a political tool. It would not be difficult to break the bank and stay within ethical and contractual responsibilities.

Mr. Dawson: Why should the term "rationing" be used in relation to the health service when it is applied to no other area where infinite demand will always be met with finite resources? Does not "rationing" have pejorative overtones?

Mrs. Roe: That word has been used for many years to describe the budgetary dilemmas that certain doctors and hospitals face. We should use the term "rationing" and be open about it. In Health Committee meetings, we used the word "priorities", but we also referred to "rationing" because it meant something to the people who were giving evidence.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Roe: No, I will not give way any more as I am under a time constraint.

The Government's disordered and ill-thought-through approach must be replaced by a wider debate involving the consumers. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has already said, the most controversial questions must be addressed if we are to make such a debate meaningful. We must certainly ask why the Government have not recognised the key inefficiencies of the NHS that the previous Government tackled. Where is the cost-effective management, clinician innovation and progress? In short, we must replace rationing with rationale, rhetoric with responsibility and words with deeds.

6.33 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I have listened to the debate with great interest as it is about an area that is dear to my heart. In opening the debate, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) called for a mature and adult discussion of the future of the health service. It obviously takes at least 18 years for Conservative Members to reach maturity, because that is the first that we have heard of anything approaching an adult and mature debate. Unfortunately, I am afraid that Opposition Members have failed in that endeavour this afternoon. They expressed a desire to discuss the mature issues of the day, but spoiled it by using soundbite politics and rhetoric that is designed to scare rather than inform people.

I was a doctor throughout the 18 years of the previous Government, and never once did I hear mention of the word "rationing"—it never crossed the Government's lips. It was not an area for discussion. There are real debates to be had, and I would like to enter into genuine, meaningful and mature debates about the health service. We must consider what we can expect of the health service as we enter the next millennium. There is no question but that expectations are changing. People expect

[Dr. Howard Stoate]

and deserve better health care, better services and improved life expectancy—and that is what they should receive.

Health possibilities change daily. We can now operate on babies in the womb and talk about the possibility of replacing brain cells in people with Parkinson's disease. Ten years ago, such procedures were science fiction. We now rely far more on evidence-based medicine that enables us to back up our decisions with meaningful science. I shall concentrate on the issue of rational science in my speech today.

No system in the world will ever meet every need that is placed upon it—and we cannot pretend that it will. However, when we decide to prioritise in a particular area, our decision must be backed by sound science. We have heard much this afternoon about media hype regarding the NHS crisis. The NHS has always been under pressure. I have endured 20 winters as an NHS doctor, and every year there has been a problem with the availability of NHS beds, people on trolleys and waiting lists. However, the reality is that my health authority experienced one bad day this year and that difficulty was ameliorated tremendously because the winter pressures money allowed social services teams to care for people in their own homes. The Government said that we would provide assistance, and that is what we have delivered.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border) *rose—*

Dr. Stoate: I am sorry, there is no time to give way.

I shall give an example. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) mentioned that I am a general practitioner. I saw a patient—a lady with a breast lump—on 4 January. She had just noticed the lump, which I suspected might be cancerous. I faxed a letter on the same day—4 January—to the consultant in charge of my local breast unit. On 7 January, the senior consultant saw my patient and carried out a needle biopsy and a mammogram. The results were inconclusive, but the lump is probably not malignant. Those results were arrived at only three days after I referred the lady to a consultant. She has been booked to have an operation next week to remove the lump because we want to be on the safe side when managing a patient's condition.

That is the reality of what the health service can deliver because this Government have put money into breast cancer treatment, just as we promised we would. Patients do not have to wait two weeks for an opinion: they can get one in three days during a so-called "NHS crisis". That is the reality of what the Government can do. The truth is that, while we need to debate priorities in the health service, we will not hear such dialogue from Opposition Members. We need to examine the public's priorities and what people would like to see from the health service in the next few years. As medical knowledge progresses, attitudes must change accordingly.

I shall give another example. A few years ago, a lady who suffered from menstrual pain was likely to undergo a dilatation and curettage. That operation was carried out thousands of times a year on the national health service. However, it is not done any more because medical evidence has shown that it is useless and, in most cases, achieves nothing. Using evidence-based medicine, the operation has been phased out of the health service. That is one result of a mature debate about how medical science has progressed, and attitudes and clinical science have changed.

I want organisations such as the national institute for clinical excellence to be able to review world literature about what constitutes best medical practice. That would enable the best medical treatments to be passed on to all clinicians in the field. It would ensure that useless operations and procedures were abandoned and that good operations and useful procedures were enhanced. In that way, money could go a lot further and be used to treat many more patients more effectively within the constraints of any publicly or privately funded institution.

That is the sort of dialogue that I wish to have. We must consider how best medical knowledge and practice can be used to inform debate in order to help those in difficult situations. That is the sort of issue that we should consider in Parliament. We need proper, rational, adult debate rather than sterile soundbites and competitions to discover who can score the biggest political points. That does not help the situation. The people want their NHS to deliver services for them. They want to know that best practice and clinical governance is ensuring that the best medical knowledge from throughout the world is focused on their personal medical needs. That is what the Government are doing and that is why I am proud to support this Government.

6.38 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): We are having this debate today because, if one cares about the national health service, the first thing that one should do is tell the truth about it. In the three hours or so of debate today, it has become apparent that the Government refuse to tell the truth about the most fundamental and simple point governing any policy that will shape the future of the NHS. It seems that they have fallen into the trap of believing their own publicity; so much so that the Secretary of State—who, I am sure, will return to his place in a moment—spoke to a motion that bore no relation whatever to the one that we tabled. I was confused, but only because I could not work out whether his contribution was neanderthal or palaeolithic. It was a smokescreen of bluff and fundamentally intellectually dishonest. What a contrast it was to the contribution of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). *[Interruption.]*

We welcome the Secretary of State back to the Chamber. For his benefit, I point out that I am recalling the barnstorming contribution of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe, who carried out radical surgery on the Secretary of State, but, I fear, will not have cured him of his lamentable condition. Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) was absolutely right in what she said.

We are trying to establish a simple point that every schoolchild will realise is true. We have no prospect of making any progress in having a sensible debate on the national health service unless we understand the basic pattern of demand and supply in a massive endeavour that is financed out of general taxation and free at the point of sale.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Free at the point of delivery.

Mr. Duncan: Yes, free at the point of delivery. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. We must have order in the Chamber.

Mr. Duncan: I do not mind acknowledging the first sensible contribution that the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) has made today.

This is key stage 1 economics, which the Secretary of State and all the Ministers beside him—particularly, given what she said before Christmas, the Minister for Public Health—refuse to admit. There cannot be equilibrium in a system that does not have a pricing structure unless there is infinite funding of a system that faces infinite demand. That is so simple and obvious that there seems to be no point in the Minister for Public Health and her colleagues on the Government Front Bench denying it. The right hon. Lady and the Secretary of State are committing us to a sterile debate that will bedevil the future of health care in this country.

Dr. Brand: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is particularly important to acknowledge that rationing exists because the previous Government denied its existence and therefore managed to privatise long-term care and dentistry?

Mr. Duncan: We never denied the existence of rationing. That is why we introduced measures such as the private finance initiative, which the Secretary of State is now at last adopting, even though he lampooned and derided it in opposition.

We have been drawn into a sterile debate, which, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) pointed out, takes us into a meaningless auction about who is spending more. We compare percentages and amounts, which are rolled up into gross figures by the Secretary of State to reach his figure of £21 billion. However, there is no point in any of that unless there can be a sensible debate about how the health service is funded and about the fact that there is rationing in the service, always has been and always will be.

This sterile debate only brings politics in disrepute. The Secretary of State is guilty of that. He always looks around and chats to his ministerial team when he is being mentioned in the House, as he was so rudely doing when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), the shadow Health Secretary, mentioned him this afternoon. There is rationing and, if the Secretary of State does not believe that, I will give him the latest example of the fiasco that is his waiting list policy—a form of rationing if ever there was one.

I have a letter from a doctor at a hospital in Leeds, which says:

"Due to the enormity of my in-patient waiting list, I am unable to see new patients requiring operative intervention for a considerable period of time. As my current waiting time for surgery is in excess of 18 months, I am now not going to be in a position to see new patients until my waiting time for surgery drops below nine months. There is therefore going to be an inevitable delay of several years before I am likely to be able to see your patient."

If that is not rationing, what is? If the Secretary of State is not prepared to admit the condition of the health service, which he is making worse, I do not know what the world will think of him.

The Secretary of State derided *Doctor* magazine.

Mr. Dobson: Yep.

Mr. Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman says, "Yep". I think that is his word for "yes". An article in *Hospital Doctor* magazine, entitled "How rationing splits you and the patient", contains a box headed "Squaring up", which says:

"Many doctors try to be honest with patients about clinical rationing".

When will the Secretary of State square up and be equally honest with the patients whom he is cheating day in and day out?

If there is no rationing, why is a whole edition of *Doctor* magazine devoted to the issue? It says that its exclusive research, carried out with *Hospital Doctor*—which the Secretary of State also derides—is the biggest survey yet of doctors' experience of rationing and that the results offer compelling evidence that the Government must acknowledge that rationing is an everyday reality in the national health service. That statement is made not in black and white but, more appealing to the Secretary of State, in red and white. Perhaps he can at least admit the basic fact that the health service is now facing rationing.

The Secretary of State has promised a statement on Viagra, although we have not yet received it.

Mr. Dobson *indicated assent.*

Mr. Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman nods. Where is it?

Mr. Dobson: It is coming up.

Mr. Duncan: It is coming up. The Secretary of State makes a quip, with a smile on his face. I hope that we can get some answers, because many people want to know if they will be prescribed Viagra on the national health service or whether there will be an extension of the rationing that he says does not exist.

The Conservative party is interested not only in the national health service, but in all health care in the country. We are prepared to admit that there is rationing in the NHS and to consider the public-private mix that might improve health care overall.

We have listened today to backward, old-fashioned old Labour comment about the private sector. If Labour Members want to stick to those old nostrums and deny people in Britain the health care that could better be delivered to them if those Members were not so luddite in their attitude, so be it. People will soon realise that Labour's approach is so backward-looking that it is denying people the health care that they could otherwise receive. There is too much old-fashioned dogma. The Secretary of State will not admit the basic fact that rationing exists, so his policy will run further into the sand, and health care in this country will have been hindered and hampered by the wilful ignorance of this deluded Government.

6.48 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The Opposition called today's debate on the pretext of talking about what they call rationing. Labour Members are happy to discuss the speed, availability and effectiveness of treatment on the national health service. Indeed, I shall spend most of my few minutes at the end of this debate talking about that.

[Mr. John Denham]

It is clear to anyone who has listened to the debate how right wing and out of touch Tory Front Benchers are. I stand willing to be corrected, but I listened to the contribution of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who was full of praise for the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who spoke from the Front Bench, and he singularly failed to endorse the right hon. Lady's ideas for the future of private medicine in the health service. The right hon. Lady's speech and those of other Conservative Front Benchers have made it clear that, for them, today's debate has not been about improving the national health service.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: We spent the past 18 years being accused of secretly plotting to privatise the health service and, before we go down that curious path again, I point out that we are no more guilty of it now than we were before. To all Conservatives, it is self-evident that a healthy private sector relieves the pressures on the national health service. That is not inconsistent with wanting a better NHS consistent with all the fine principles on which it is based and which we all endorse. It is a great pity to hear old Labour's arguments so faithfully trotted out whenever we discuss the NHS when Labour is now charged with the responsibility of government and ought to be discussing what is happening now.

Mr. Denham: It is very interesting to hear the right hon. and learned Gentleman; he still has not endorsed what his right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald said. As for the old Labour argument, I wonder whether the right hon. and learned Gentleman agrees that

"The national health service is not intended to be a safety net, a guarantor of a minimum standard to those who can afford better private care. It is intended to use taxpayers' funds to provide access to the best of modern clinical practice, and to do so on the basis of the patient's clinical need and without regard to his or her financial circumstances."

That is not what we heard that from the right hon. Lady. Those are the words of the previous Conservative Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell).

Today's debate has not been about improving the NHS. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) said, it has been about giving up the ghost on the NHS. The Conservative argument is not that the NHS is coping, but that it cannot cope—not today, not tomorrow, not ever. Even Baroness Thatcher thought that she should claim that the NHS was safe in her hands. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald had no such reservation.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Denham: No, I have only very limited time, and have already allowed a considerable intervention.

We heard a softening-up job—softening up of the public for a Tory party that does not believe that the job of making the health service work is worth the candle. People have been warned. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald would have done well to listen to the right hon. Member for Charnwood, when he said:

"I believe that those who argue that the national health service is unaffordable have fallen victim to an old law. Every difficult and intractable question has an answer that is simple, obvious and wrong."

A better summary of the right hon. Lady's speech I cannot imagine.

The main claim that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald made was that there is rationing in the NHS. I shall point out, as others have, that, if she believes that, she must also say that there was rationing under the 18 years of Conservative government; yet the previous Government never talked about it.

Miss Widdecombe: It says so in the motion—as the hon. Gentleman would know if he read it.

Mr. Denham: The right hon. Lady made no mention of that when in government, despite the considerable opportunities to do so. Indeed—there is some sense in this—the previous Government said:

"Budgets will always be finite while demand is potentially open-ended. There will always be a gap between all we wish to do and all that we can. Setting priorities is a fact of life."

I agree. There has been a need to set priorities in the health service from the beginning. There is such a need in every health service in the world. The challenge is to set those priorities properly, sensitively and effectively; to ensure that every penny that the NHS has is used to treat patients to the best effect.

Mr. Lansley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Denham: No, I have made it perfectly clear that I am not intending to do so. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) should calm down. The Minister is not giving way.

Mr. Denham: I am not intending to allow interventions because I want to make my points on priorities in the NHS.

This Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) has reminded us, are investing record amounts. We put in an extra £2.25 billion in our first two years in office. There will be £20 billion more over the next three years. I found it strange that the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) complained that we were throwing money at the system. We are investing far more in the health service than any other party promised or contemplated in this Parliament.

Clinical judgment is at the heart of decision making in the NHS. But, to make the best use of that money, people working in the NHS and those taking decisions in it need to know what works and what does not. They need to be aware of the costs of what they do and the most cost-effective and clinically effective way of doing it. The NHS needs to be organised, so that decision making is effective and reflects national and local interest. The most

damning indictment of the past 18 years of Conservative government is that the Tories failed in that key task. That is why, all too often, there are differences and variations in the health service that the Tories left behind.

It is true that patients with the same need will not always receive the same treatment. Some patients do not do so because the internal market was designed to set doctor against doctor, patient against patient, hospital against hospital. That was the entire logic of the internal market—each fundholding practice focusing only on the needs of its own patients; each trust focusing only on the patients sent to it.

Of course, in such a system, everyone has been working to do their best—GPs for their patients, hospitals for the people who are sent to them. However, doctors and nurses in every hospital know that they could see fewer patients with less severe conditions if the links between primary and secondary care were better. Doctors in every GP practice know that their work load reflects the failure to tackle the roots of ill-health and health inequalities in the wider community—in work, in provision for young children and through social exclusion. Yet those professionals are without the power to influence the way in which problems are tackled. We will abolish the internal market, replacing division and competition with co-operation and partnership. We shall improve primary care, ensuring that the whole service works together to tackle health inequalities.

The internal market is not the only problem. When hard-pressed doctors do not always have the latest information and analysis to hand, some patients will receive treatment that is not the most clinically effective and cost-effective.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Denham: I have already given way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not want to be told why, in the health service that they have created, there are variations in treatment and access to treatment in different parts of the country.

One of the reasons for such variation is that there is no organisation that brings together in one place the best, evidence-based assessment of the latest treatment, drugs, surgical procedures and new technologies. As a result, despite the best efforts of professionals in the NHS, some patients do not receive the most cost-effective and clinically effective treatment. Some receive treatment that costs money but does not work well, or of which the risks may outweigh the benefits. When that happens, money is wasted—money that could have funded treatment for someone else. The organisation that could provide that information does not exist. Nor have we effective ways of getting information to those who need it. The national institute for clinical excellence will do that job, getting that information to doctors.

With total predictability, the Conservative party opposes such a proposal. It would rather that doctors worked without the latest information and patients received second best. It would prefer taxpayers' money to be wasted on ineffective treatment. It would rather that patients waited longer to benefit from proven advances in medical science.

Some patients do not receive comparable treatment because the NHS bequeathed by the Tories has lacked the tools to analyse how to manage services effectively. It has lacked the encouragement to work together to tackle inequalities in health provision. The Tories' health service could not measure the difference between a really well-run hospital and a poorly run one. We know the cost of seeing a consultant in every hospital, but not whether people get better having done so. Nor do we know whether there is fair access to services, or what patients and carers think of the services that they receive.

We shall introduce better performance measures—counting the things that count for patients. The commission for health improvement will oversee the quality of care in hospitals. We are setting out national service frameworks to define the standards that everyone should be able to enjoy. We will ensure that patients have better information, so that they can make the best use of the NHS. By April, 40 per cent. of England will be covered by NHS Direct—telephone advice from nurses 24 hours a day.

The message from the Opposition is clear: the Conservative party has given up on the NHS. We reject its pessimism; so do the British public. There has always been a need to set priorities in the health service, and our priorities are clear. We are funding extra nurses. We are training more doctors. One in four accident and emergency departments will be modernised in the coming year. Our priorities are making available money for winter pressures; investment in modernisation; better information; less waste, and co-operation instead of competition. And the principles remain the same: that if people

"are ill or injured there will be a national health service there to help: and access to it will be based on need and need alone, not on ability to pay".

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 169, Noes 336.

Division No. 34] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa

Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dne)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaizey, Peter
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John M. Taylor and Mr. Tim Collins.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cosker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess

Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(Blam Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sailer, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House reaffirms the historic principles of the NHS, that if people are ill or injured there will be a national health service there to help, and access to it will be based on need and need alone, not on ability to pay or who their general practitioner happens to be or on where they live; welcomes the measures the Government has taken, is taking and will take that will ensure that comparable, top quality treatment and care are available in every part of the country through the introduction of new arrangements for spreading best practice, including the ending of the Conservative competition of the internal market, the introduction of local Health Improvement Programmes and Primary Care Groups to put local doctors, nurses and other health professionals in the driving seat in shaping local health care, the introduction of a new Commission for Health Improvement and National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and the creation of new legal duties of partnership and quality to ensure that all parts of the NHS and social services work together to deliver top quality services to all; welcomes the record £21 billion investment to be made in the NHS, including £18 billion for the NHS in England, over the next three years, notes the record 150,000 fall in NHS waiting lists since April 1998 and the 17 per cent increase in the number of new nurse trainees in the period since Labour came to power; and further welcomes the measures that the Government intends to take over the coming year to continue to build a modern and dependable NHS, including the extension of NHS Direct to cover 19 million people, the creation of 26 Health Action Zones covering 13 million people to target areas with particularly high levels of ill health—including cancer and heart disease—and reduce health inequalities, and the targeted investment of £30 million to modernise accident and emergency departments.

Dividend Tax Credits

7.15 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I beg to move,

That this House notes that from April 1999, 300,000 non-taxpaying pensioners and 330,000 other non-taxpayers will lose an average of £75 each because of the Government's decision to abolish the dividend tax credit; further notes that 80,000 of the pensioners affected will lose over £100 per year; considers that it is unacceptable that basic rate taxpayers and higher rate taxpayers are unaffected directly by this decision which only affects non-taxpayers, half of them poor pensioners, who by definition must be poorer than taxpayers; calls on the Government to act on the promise made to the House of 30th June when the then Paymaster General stated 'I am aware of the growing anxiety among poorer non-taxpayers who have been hit by the measure so I know that we need to make our position utterly clear as quickly as possible' (Official Report, 30th June, column 175); calls upon the Government to honour now this pledge by announcing that non-taxpayers will be able to continue to reclaim a 10 per cent. tax credit from April 1999 in the same way as taxpayers who hold PEPs or ISAs will be able to do so; and further notes that this is still a 50 per cent. cut from the current 20 per cent. dividend tax credit.

The subject that we have chosen for debate has given rise to an all-party motion to correct an evident wrong—the withdrawal of dividend tax relief from the poorest savers in the country. From April this year, at least 630,000 people whose incomes are too low for them to pay tax will lose an average of £75 a year. That may well be an underestimate, because the figures that we have are four years out of date and the Treasury does not have more recent estimates.

We know that about half those people—300,000 of them—are pensioners who are, by definition, the poorest pensioners. They are about to be penalised. The purpose of the debate is to end that injustice and to get the Government, even at this late date, to think again and change their mind.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Would it be fair to say that those who will be affected are working-class pensioners, not middle-class pensioners? Perhaps that is why there is not much sympathy for them from the Government.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Prime Minister's attitude is that everyone must be middle class, and those pensioners do not exist. However, we know that they do exist. They have written letters to me and my hon. Friend, and to Labour Members, complaining about the injustice. They have been left behind in the new Labour project, and it is up to the Opposition to stand up for them this evening.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if he and his colleagues are sincere about helping the poorest pensioners, they would not adopt a discriminatory form of help that simply helps poor pensioners who save in a particular way—through shareholdings? Instead, perhaps he should support the idea of income guarantees, lower fuel bills and so on. Moreover, does he agree that pensioners who had that discriminatory benefit in the past have been helped by a 25 per cent. appreciation of the FTSE 100 since 2 July, when that change was made in response to the Government's global economic management?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The flaw in that muddled and incoherent intervention is that those people cannot sell their shares, as the hon. Gentleman can. They have to live on the income, and the dividends have not increased. The effective income that they get from their dividends is to be cut by an average of £75 a year from 1 April. That is the injustice that we seek to correct this evening.

The first Labour Budget in 1997 set the process in train. Its central feature, as the House will recollect, was that notorious £5 billion a year raid on pension funds. That was done by stopping pension funds reclaiming tax credits on the dividend income that they received. That was exactly what the British economy did not want at that time. It wanted more savings and less consumption. If the Government had not hit pension funds in that way, the subsequent interest rate rises later that year would not have occurred, and we would not be living with the consequences today.

That was also misconceived because the Government were, at the same time, encouraging people to get off welfare and to build up long-term savings and self-reliance, but by hitting pension funds in such a way they adopted an entirely contradictory policy. That was the wrong thing to do at the wrong time.

When they were doing that to savings institutions, the Government announced that, from 1 April 1999, they would restrict dividend tax credits to individuals—particularly and specifically by halving the rate to 10 per cent.

I remind the House that tax credits are not some lucky bonus or handout from the Government. They are designed to prevent double taxation—taxation once in the hands of the company, through corporation tax, and again in the hands of the individual saver, through income tax. Tax credits avoid such double taxation, and from 1 April they are to be halved.

That is bad enough, but, although higher-rate taxpayers will be compensated by a cut in the rate of tax on that savings income, non-taxpayers—this is the point—will not be able to reclaim tax credits, even at the new 10 per cent. rate. Uniquely, non-taxpayers are being singled out and penalised in that way.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: In a moment; I want to emphasise this point.

Taxpaying individuals and pensioners will be compensated; non-taxpaying individuals—who, by definition, are poorer—will not be compensated and will be subject to receive that penalty from 1 April.

Mrs. Browning: May I give my right hon. Friend an example involving constituents of mine? They are a married couple in their late 70s who live in Honiton, in Devon, and the wife has written to me. They spent most of their working lives working abroad for a Christian charity which, typically for that sort of organisation, did not have a pension scheme. Those people will suffer, and certainly, as non-taxpayers, they will suffer the loss of £70 a year. That is a strange way for the Government, who came into office with cries of fairness and justice, to reward people who have dedicated their lives to such work.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I should say at the beginning of the debate that interventions cannot become speeches. They must be brief.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That intervention was well worth listening to, because my hon. Friend used a specific example to illuminate what the Government are doing. It is an eloquent commentary on the new Labour party that it is sacrificing the poorest pensioners—the poorest savers—and rewarding the better off.

We were so amazed by the announcement in 1997 that we assumed that it was a mistake. As hon. Members will remember, that year's Finance Bill was rushed through—under a guillotine motion, by inexperienced Ministers and in a few weeks. That Finance Bill contained 17 tax rises, but no one expected the Labour party to break its promise not to increase personal taxes by targeting the poorest households in the country.

During the passage of the following year's Finance Bill we raised the matter to have it looked at again. It was being dealt with by the ex-Paymaster General, the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson). There was something particularly distasteful about him sheltering £12 million in an offshore trust in Guernsey when he was penalising the poorest households in the country.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Was not there another distasteful aspect to what the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) was saying? His case was that it was possible for those people to realise their capital and re-invest it in a different form of holding. That would have made them liable to capital gains tax, when he was immune from it.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My right hon. and learned Friend makes—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We should remind ourselves that, unless there is a substantive motion before us, we should not criticise other Members of the House.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My right hon. and learned Friend was making a general point that Labour Members are good at putting up taxes that other people will pay but they will not pay themselves.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) started a campaign with Age Concern, with cross-party support, to get the matter reviewed. He was successful. During the passage of the Finance Bill he argued that the matter was iniquitous. We received support from a number of Labour Members—in particular the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston), who is now the Solicitor-General, so that rebellion must have had official sanction.

To be fair to the ex-Paymaster General—I am sorry that he is not in his place to hear me being fair about him—he announced a retreat, saying that the matter was wrong and had to be looked at again. When the Finance Bill was on Report, he referred to a meeting between himself, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, a number of other hon. Members and Age Concern:

"I think that they made a powerful case . . . I am sympathetic to that case."

He continued:

"I am aware also of the growing anxiety among poorer non-taxpayers who have been hit by the measure, so I know that we need to make our position utterly clear as quickly as possible. I am working to that end."—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 174-75.]

The ex-Paymaster General conceded that those people had been hit, and he was going to do something about it. What happened after that?

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): May I raise with my right hon. Friend the case of my constituent, Mr. George of East Grinstead, who—encouraged by the campaign of Age Concern and my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb)—wrote to me on 21 May? On 25 May I wrote to the Paymaster General to inquire on my constituent's behalf about this monstrous measure. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the reply arrived in my office on 14 January? Does not my right hon. Friend consider that to be impertinent, casual and arrogant on the part of the Treasury?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I could not describe it any better.

What happened after the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West had made those concessions? He got into a lot of personal difficulties and became, in effect, a lame-duck Minister. That took the form of not answering any letters, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) has shown.

That is not the worst example. Many letters written early last year have only just been replied to by the new Paymaster General, the hon. Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo), but far worse happened. On 10 December 1998, the hon. Lady, then Financial Secretary to the Treasury announced that she had reviewed the matter and there would be no change at all. The original policy to withdraw dividend tax credits from these people would go ahead.

Amazingly, the Paymaster General justified that in a press release as an attempt to boost profit retention by British companies. That was the best that she could come up with. Even if that was an attempt to justify the policy, it has not worked. According to Government figures announced in November, business investment will fall from the 8 per cent. growth of recent years to only 1 per cent. this year.

The policy has not even succeeded in boosting investment by British companies. Nor has the policy gone down at all well—as might be expected—with those affected by it. We are only just beginning to receive letters, because most taxpayers are not yet aware of what has happened. They may not even be aware of it on 1 April. It will not be until a year hence—in April of next year—when they write for their dividend tax credits and will be refused by the Inland Revenue. We are witnessing only the start of a campaign by the people affected.

However, we have received many letters. A lady wrote to us from Paignton in Devon pointing out that these sums may be small—perhaps £100 or £200 a year—but to her they represent the difference between retaining a decent style of life or not. She concludes her letter by saying:

"I'm not quite sure which 'people' this 'people's government' represents but it doesn't seem to be people like me."

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

Another gentleman wrote to a Labour Member in Durham without success. He describes this measure as

"a hidden tax on the less well off."

A gentleman from Nottingham has written to us pointing out that this is an attack on "the poorer pensioners", and that it is an insult to suggest to these people that they should take their money out of the shares they own and invest it in PEPs or ISAs. As he says, the fees and charges incurred in taking money out of one investment and putting it into another make this a wholly inappropriate course of action for the vast majority of these people.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): TESSAs, PEPs and ISAs are of particular benefit to upper-rate taxpayers, and are of little benefit to those who pay no tax.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. When the Government suggest to these people that they should rush out, sell their shares and put the money into ISAs, they are telling them to invest in a savings vehicle that is untried, untested and does not yet exist. Furthermore, the fees and charges will cancel out any advantage. It is completely inappropriate advice, and I hope that the Financial Services Authority will take a close interest in any other such recommendations from Treasury Front-Bench Members.

The investors we are talking about are typically widows who inherited a few shares when their husbands died, probably instead of a good occupational pension scheme. They rely on this small annual tax repayment to live on, and they cannot, at the end of their lives, seriously be expected to take their money out and invest in a new savings plan designed for people who are saving throughout their lives. It shows what a fantasy world Treasury Ministers live in when they seriously suggest to pensioners that, at the end of their lives, they sell their shares and invest in a new Government scheme that does not yet exist.

It is not true that these people are in any way compensated by other measures, as suggested in the Government's amendment. Their amendment suggests that increases in income support will go some way towards compensating these people. They do not realise—so I shall remind them—that many of these people are above the income support level. They are below the tax threshold, but they do not receive income support, so it is irrelevant to say that income support will increase in a future Budget. That is misleading.

Some people are below or just at the income support level. This measure will force more people away from reliance on their own savings and into reliance on welfare and benefits. I thought that that was the opposite of what the Government were trying to do in their welfare reforms. They tell us that they want to get people off welfare and into self-reliance. That fact alone shows what a shambles the Government are in with their welfare reforms. They are driving more people into dependency on the state instead of reliance on their savings.

What will the Government save by this measure? What sums will the Treasury recover? According to their own estimates, after the halving of the rate of dividend tax credits, the Treasury will get only an extra £25 million a year. Compare that with the £5 billion that they got by raiding pension funds. That £25 million is, in effect, a tax increase, and it is targeted precisely at the least well-off. It is laser-focused at those least able to afford it. They pay no tax, so they are, by definition, the less well off, but they are the people who the Labour party has decided and confirmed will be hit as I have described.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): On a matter of philosophy, does my right hon. Friend think that there is any justice, honour or fairness in the Government's decision? How does it meet the objectives that were expressed by the Prime Minister in his much-heralded speech last week?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I think that the Prime Minister wishes that these people would go away, as they have no part in the new Labour project. They have been left behind, but not by the House. It is one of the jobs of the House of Commons to remind the Government that some people are hit, perhaps inadvertently, by Government measures. It is the job of hon. Members to highlight that problem and get something done about it.

Luckily, there is something we can do. This measure can be stopped, because some Labour Members will join us in the Division Lobby this evening. The signatories to an early-day motion that has been tabled come from all the main political parties and include 28 Labour Members. The motion before the House this evening is identical to the motion that they signed. They should start to put into practice what they preach.

Doubtless the Labour Whips have been busy. Some of the more impressionable new Labour Members of Parliament may have signed the EDM for a quick and easy press release in their local paper, or may have never stood up for any principles in their lives. That does not apply to all the 28 signatories. Some Labour Members still have principles, and they know that this is a mean, unnecessary measure. It is tax reform at its worst. We look forward to joining them in the Division Lobby at 10 o'clock.

7.38 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes that the fundamental reform of company taxation carried out by the Government has removed major company taxation distortions from the system and put in place a sound base for better quality investment and growth that will lead to greater prosperity for everyone in the UK, including pensioners; that the Government has taken significant steps to help pensioners, including a guaranteed minimum income for the poorest pensioners through an increase in Income Support from this April worth over £236 extra per year for single pensioners and over £377 extra for couples, a minimum guarantee on tax so that pensioners have no income tax to pay unless their income rises above a certain level, £20 of winter fuel payments for every pensioner household, the introduction of free eye tests for pensioners from this April, new travel concessions on public transport and an extra £21 billion invested in the National Health Service; and further notes that this contrasts sharply with the record of the previous Government which introduced VAT on fuel at 8% and tried to increase it to 17.5%, which introduced charges on eye tests for pensioners, which presided over the mis-selling of pensions which severely damaged the financial security of many pensioners, which ran down the National Health Service on which many pensioners rely, and which was responsible for boom and bust economics which eroded the real value of pensioners' savings through inflation exceeding 10%.'.

The debate highlights the Government's progress in two key areas of reform: reform of economic policy to encourage prosperity and growth, and reform to support those in our society who are in most need. I shall deal with a number of points made by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat–Amory). His central proposition is that, as pensioners who are non-taxpayers will lose because an alternative has not been provided, the Labour Government have not discharged their duty. That is incorrect, and I shall show why.

In May 1997, the Conservative party left us with an economy with fundamental weaknesses. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not like hearing about that. It is interesting that they want to forget their poor growth and investment record. Inflation rose above target, and there was a productivity gap of 40 per cent. with the United States of America and 20 per cent. with France and Germany. No wonder they do no want to hear about that. No wonder they do not want to hear about a history of instability that discouraged long-term planning and investment.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: We immediately had to set about tackling the problems that we faced. Within days we established a new monetary framework, and as soon as possible after that, we established a new fiscal framework. The country needed a platform of long-term stability, and an end to the cycle of boom and bust that has held our economy back for so many decades, against a backdrop of mounting uncertainty and instability in a global economy.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I want to make progress. The hon. Gentleman will have plenty of time to speak.

One of the building blocks necessary for the creation of the economy that we need—an economy with high levels of growth and employment—is the reversal of the legacy of under-investment. The corporation tax system has an important part to play in our strategy for tackling that legacy. The system that we inherited was outdated and in need of modernisation. It involved damaging distortions, which encouraged companies to distribute their profits rather than reinvesting them for future growth and prosperity.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No, I will not. I should like to make some progress. When I have done so, I shall be happy to give way first to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton)—who has also been trying to intervene—and then to the hon. Gentleman. In any event, he will have a chance to comment when he winds up the debate, as he presumably will.

Encouraging high levels of investment is vital if we are to break out of the cycle of boom and bust that has afflicted our economy for so long. We want a more stable and prosperous economy to benefit everyone in Britain. That is what the Opposition fail to understand or recognise. Since coming to office, the Government have introduced an important package of measures to reform corporation tax. First, we cut both the main and the small companies rate of corporation tax by 2 per cent., in July 1997—

Mr. Sayeed: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The title of the motion is "Pensioners and Dividend Tax Credits". That has nothing to do with corporation tax.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Paymaster General is perfectly in order, because the Government amendment mentions such matters.

Dawn Primarolo: If the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) does not understand the context in which the reforms were made, I do not think I can help him. It just goes to show how little he recognises the devastation that his Government left behind for us to clear up.

As I was saying, we cut 2 per cent. from the small companies and main corporation tax rate in July 1997, and a further 1p in the March 1998 Budget. That means that the main rate of corporation tax will be 30 per cent., while small companies will pay just 20 per cent. The rate of corporation tax is now at its lowest level ever, and is lower than that of any of our major international competitive partners. The hon. Gentleman must understand that. He must also understand that we have given an unprecedented undertaking to guarantee the same rates for the duration of the present Parliament.

Mr. Soames: In explaining the background, will the Paymaster General explain how the loss of £800 for my constituents Mr. and Mrs. George will encourage long-term investment by companies?

Dawn Primarolo: I will answer the hon. Gentleman's question when I reach it in my speech. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman asked me whether I was prepared to answer the question, and I am. The answer is that his constituents were provided for, in terms of alternatives for investment. The proposition that his party seeks to advance is that there is no alternative, and that the Government have left such people high and dry. I intend to demonstrate to the hon. Gentleman and the House that is not the case.

Mr. Loughton: I am interested to note that taxing the poorest pensioners is now described as modernisation by the Government.

Will the Paymaster General give me a reference—in an election manifesto, for instance—that suggests that the last Government had anything to do with removing tax credits from the poorest pensioners? That is the point that we are debating. What has it to do with everything that the Paymaster General has come up with so far? Is she trying to pin it on the Conservative party?

Dawn Primarolo: I think that, in his impatience to intervene, the hon. Gentleman forgot the point of his intervention. I am trying to explain to him why reform of the corporation tax system was necessary for the encouragement of long-term investment, in the context of what happened to tax credits. I shall then demonstrate that

[Dawn Primarolo]

pensioners who are not taxpayers have an alternative, and that the central proposition in the motion is not sustainable.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I will, but then I must make progress.

Sir Robert Smith: What concerns me about the line that the Paymaster General is developing is that it would have been available to the Government in June and July, when I wrote to them about the issue on behalf of a constituent. However, they were not able to produce it until January of the following year. I should have thought that the Government would have accepted that there was a serious concern to be considered, that they wanted to find a way of reforming the position, and that they failed to do so. Why can they not accept that the Opposition have a case, and deal with that case?

Dawn Primarolo: The point of my speech is to demonstrate that there is not an issue in that regard. The hon. Gentleman appears to be criticising the Government on the basis of a series of complaints, suggestions, observations and urgings for reconsideration.

Certainly, the point at issue is important. We are talking about poor pensioners. However, we subsequently reflected on the issue, and made certain that our views were correct as originally stated. That is what we are doing now. That is what I did on 10 December when I made my announcement, and that is what I am explaining to the House.

We have abolished advance corporation tax. We have solved the problem of surplus ACT once and for all, whereas the last Government could only tinker and come up with a partial solution. If Opposition Members want to talk about cutting tax credit, we can produce many quotations from the time when they were in government and pursuing a certain policy.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire asked about the connection with corporation tax. Here is the explanation that he sought. We have withdrawn payable tax credits for pension funds and companies, and are withdrawing them for individuals from April this year.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I have been very generous. I have given way a number of times. I wish to make some progress now; then I shall be happy to give way again. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] It is not for others to tell me when I should give way; it is for me to decide. I have been very generous in taking a number of interventions, and I now wish to make progress.

The withdrawal of payable tax credits has removed the distortion that encouraged large institutional investors such as pension funds to press for higher dividends, rather than allowing companies to retain profits and reinvest in business. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members do not want to hear this. They would rather shout insults than deal with the issue.

Our move has created a more level playing field for business and business decisions.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I hope that my hon. Friend will give me time to make some progress, given the number who wish to speak and the fact that I need to get the Government's view on the record so that hon. Members understand the context in which the decision has been made.

Payable tax credits for individuals will be withdrawn in April. We announced the change in July 1997, giving people nearly two years to consider their investments and, if necessary, to switch them before the rules take effect. The vast majority of shareholders will be unaffected, but we have given the others time to react to the changes, and to plan to protect their income. Of course, they still have a further three months.

The House will note that the motion that the Conservative party has tabled does not call for the reintroduction of ACT. Conservative Members accept its abolition and reform, but ask for a longer period of phasing-out, so the pensioners whom they talk about will be faced with exactly the same decisions, except in the future. So Conservative Members are not saying that they want a different strategy. It is just a way in which to use pensioners and to try to make it sound as if the Government have not provided for an alternative.

I do not propose to give financial advice to anyone from the Dispatch Box. Individuals' circumstances are different and we recognise that, but the House has done all it can for small savers. We have introduced individual savings accounts, which mean that, for the first time, tax-free savings are accessible to all, not just the better off—not that Conservative Members did anything about it when they were in power, or cared about small investors and poorer pensioners who had only a small amount to invest. Did they introduce any vehicles? They did not.

It is the present Government who have made it possible for those on low incomes to have tax-free interest on bank deposits with ISAs, however small their savings. In the past, the most vulnerable savers faced the heaviest tax burden of all on their savings. We have given them that opportunity without restricting their flexibility to withdraw money if they need it.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way at last. Does she believe that the long list of economic objectives that she has set out will be achieved by taking £25 million from 300,000 poorer pensioners?

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: That is it in a nutshell.

Dawn Primarolo: In a nutshell, the investors in question have alternatives. Again, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) seeks to perpetuate the suggestion that the money is to be taken away from those people and that there is no alternative. That is not true: alternatives are there. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps some hon. Members could calm down.

Dawn Primarolo: It is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because Conservative Members are so pleased to see me at the

Dispatch Box and keen to participate in my first contribution as Paymaster General. That is it in a nutshell. I can always rely on Conservative Members to assist me when I speak from the Dispatch Box.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No. I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Lynne Jones: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said, and the Government are right to abolish ACT. However, could the Government not institute a system that allows non-taxpayers, who, by definition, must be on low incomes, to have their dividends paid tax free? Such a system already exists for bank and building society interest, where they fill in form R85. Why could not such a system be put in place?

Dawn Primarolo: Savings vehicles are available to those investors that would enable them to invest and to get a return on their money. Again, the Opposition seek to make it sound as if there is nothing else that those people could do.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) keeps bobbing up and down and asking the Paymaster General to give way. It does not seem as if she wants to give way to him.

Dawn Primarolo: Within ISAs, those who invest in equities will continue to have payable tax credits for a further five years, despite the corporation tax changes. Already more than 300 providers have registered with the Inland Revenue to offer the ISAs. That will help to make them widely available and to create competition between providers. We have also introduced the CAT—cost access terms—standards, which will help to keep charges down, making ISAs potentially good value for money investments even for those on low incomes and small investors.

That is the point that Conservative Members cannot understand and will not acknowledge. Most important— *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members table a motion about poor investors, savers and those who are on low incomes and then will not listen to the Government's case, which demonstrates that what they say is wrong. If they are so concerned, during this part of my speech—after asking me to address the matter—they should at least let me make some progress.

Most important, for all savers, we are determined to end the cycle of boom and bust that dragged down the economy and the value of people's savings under the Conservative Government.

Our corporation tax reforms provide a framework for long-term growth. They remove a number of serious distortions from the system and enhance the competitiveness of the United Kingdom as a location for international investment. They are good for the economy. That means that they are good for everyone, including pensioners.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham) *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I have been very generous in giving way, but I will give way to the hon. Lady and then make some progress.

Mrs. Lait: The hon. Lady is trying hard to get across the Government's policy. She says that the Government are offering an alternative to poor pensioners who save through shares. How much would she expect a poor pensioner to have to pay in charges to sell the shares? How much capital gains tax would the poorer pensioner be liable for? How much would the charges be to buy a PEP, TESSA or ISA?

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Lady will know that it depends on which particular services are used, but as she will also acknowledge—presumably, she supports the Government's policy—by the use of the CAT standards and by increasing competition in the market, we are driving down those charges.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I have taken eight interventions. I should like to make a little more progress.

Under the Government, pensioners are better off. They have been better off since the Government took office and are certainly better off since we announced our corporation tax reforms in July 1997. As Conservative Members obviously want to be reminded of the good things that the Government have done, let me go through a few of them.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I will not, if my hon. Friend will forgive me.

In the comprehensive spending review, we announced a £2.5 billion package of support for pensioners. I say to each pensioner: the Government care for pensioners and for the poorest pensioners. The right hon. Member for Wells sought to ridicule the changes to increase income support for those in most need: an extra £236 for a single pensioner and £377 for a couple. Those increases are three times the increase due under the normal uprating.

It was the Conservative party that ended free eye tests and that now tries to masquerade as a supporter of poor pensioners; it did not worry about them when it abolished free eye tests. It was the Conservative party that put value added tax on fuel and tried to raise it to 17.5 per cent. Its concern for poor pensioners did not exist at that stage. Obviously, it has found it only in opposition.

We are introducing a programme to ensure that people can claim the benefits to which they are entitled. Millions of pensioners are not getting what they are entitled to. When in government, the Conservative party did nothing about that. Conservative Members now have the cheek to tell us that they care for poor pensioners.

[Dawn Primarolo]

This winter and last winter, we gave each pensioner household a £20 winter fuel payment, with a £50 payment to those in most need. Along with the cut in VAT and other measures that we have taken, pensioner households benefit by an average £108—it is £140 for the poorest. We are also investing £500 million over the next three years to continue with the provision of winter fuel payments. We reversed the previous Government's decision to charge for eye tests. Conservative Members would not support us or congratulate us on that, or say that it will help poor pensioners. They abolished free eye tests, but we restored them.

The NHS is particularly important for pensioners. In our first two years in office, we are investing an extra £2.25 billion in the NHS. We also plan to deal with our inheritance from the Tories.

Here are the facts: help on fuel; minimum income guarantees—

Mr. Soames: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you could help my constituents, who look to Parliament to protect their rights. How are they to get a truthful answer to the question of how having £800 taken from them will make them better off? How am I to get an answer to that question, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am quite sure that the hon. Gentleman knows how to help his constituents, and that he knows his way around the House. It is not a matter for the occupant of the Chair.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) can help his constituents by understanding the changes that the Government have made and by explaining them properly to his constituents, rather than by building on his constituents' concerns and fears about losing money. He should explain to them the alternatives.

The Government have provided more investment in the NHS, and free eye tests. Those measures will help to ensure that pensioners have higher spending power and a better standard of living. Conservative Members failed to implement those measures when they were in government.

The Government's programme does not stop at helping today's pensioners, because we care also about tomorrow's pensioners. Conservative Members did not worry about those pensioners when they presided over the pensions mis-selling scandal. This Government tackled that problem and are fighting for pension security. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury continues to work closely with the pensions industry, making more progress on the matter than was ever made by the previous Government.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman. I have spoken for a considerable time and have given way nine times, and many hon. Members wish to speak. The hon. Gentleman should respect that.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Primarolo: Much as I am tempted to give way, the answer is no.

In December, the Government announced another major plank of their welfare reform package—the Green Paper, "Partnership in Pensions". The Government are about helping tomorrow's pensioners and protecting today's pensioners, and about examining retirement issues and ensuring that there is security in retirement. That is good news for pensioners.

Conservative Members' record on helping pensioners shows that they have no right to try to lecture the Government on caring for the poor. They failed today's pensioners, and they failed tomorrow's pensioners. They spent years not addressing the issues. They put VAT on heating after promising not to, and they did not help to solve the pensions mis-selling scandal. The Tories wrongly encouraged people to opt out of occupational pensions into private personal pension plans, and failed to take action to compensate victims of pensions mis-selling.

Conservative Members do not know what it is to keep a promise, and they are angry that the Government are delivering on our promises. I tell my hon. Friends that the Opposition motion is about using pensioners, frightening people and failing to explain what they know to be the case—there are alternatives, and people's income can be protected. I urge my hon. Friends to reject the Opposition motion and to support the Government amendment.

8.4 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I congratulate the Paymaster General on her promotion—which she may not have expected. Other than the Chancellor, she is now the only Minister who has been at the Treasury since abolishing the tax credit was first proposed to the House. I hoped that, today, the Paymaster General would offer a better defence of the proposal. However, she failed to answer any of the substantive questions asked by Opposition Members—specifically that asked by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait)—which is deeply to be regretted.

I congratulate the official Opposition on their motion, which has the support of myself and other Liberal Democrat Members. For many months, we have supported and worked on the issue with Conservative Members. I pay credit specifically to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), who has worked with my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), to create a cross-party alliance. We have been pleased also that some Labour Members have supported us in our early-day motion. In Committee, we all remember the brief but pertinent and very effective—or so we thought—intervention made by the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston), the new Solicitor-General, who has gone on to higher things. We had hoped that he would use his influence to express his concern about the poorest pensioners, but, regrettably, that has not happened.

I welcome this debate because it gives the Opposition an opportunity to expose the Government's soundbite politics, which overwhelms substantial politics. The Prime Minister was at it again this weekend, in the *News of the World*, when he said:

"This is your Government, living in your world, with your priorities."

He applied the usual Government spin about the Government's minimum income guarantee for pensioners, which is an Arthur Daley guarantee and is not worth the paper it is not written on.

The Government's real policies take money from pensioners. Moreover, the minimum income guarantee will not protect any of the pensioners whom we are considering in this debate, as most of them will have savings above £8,000 from which they gain their dividend income. They will not be eligible for the income support increases mentioned by Ministers. Those pensioners, therefore, will be affected but not protected by the Government's policy. The Paymaster General shakes her head. I should be grateful if she would intervene on that substantive point. I should like her also to deal with it in her reply. Opposition Members are concerned that those pensioners will be affected and that they will be offered absolutely no protection.

I welcome the Government's amendment, as it enables us to refer back to last week's Opposition day debate initiated by Liberal Democrat Members. In that debate, we demonstrated that the Government's NHS policy would not help pensioners as Ministers claimed it would. Ministers go on and on about the £21 billion that the policy will provide for the NHS—but Liberal Democrat Members demonstrated in last week's debate that if the year-on-year increases made by the previous Government were projected over this Parliament, the current Government will, by the fifth year of this Parliament, have produced only £1 billion extra for the NHS. That is the extent of the Government's commitment to the NHS and to the pensioners who use it. Over five years, the figure is £1 billion, not £21 billion; it is a total nonsense and fabrication. I am therefore glad that the Government have tabled their amendment, so that we can again demonstrate that that figure is a complete fabrication.

There is a long history to the debate on the issue, with which the House has dealt on many occasions. As I said, Liberal Democrat Members have developed a co-operative approach. When the issue was first debated, on 22 July 1997, in the Standing Committee considering the Finance (No. 2) Bill, I joined the hon. Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for Ashford (Mr. Green) in warning Ministers about the effect of their proposals. As the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) pointed out today, the measure was being guillotined and rushed through. However, we gave Ministers the benefit of the doubt.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Ashford and I pointed out that the Government had perhaps made a mistake, and suggested that they probably did not intend to hit the poorest pensioners. We gave them a chance to make amends. Unfortunately, Ministers were in a fairly belligerent and arrogant mood, and they told us that we were lecturing them. The Government, of course, take lectures from no one, as they keep reminding us. Nevertheless, it was a shame that they did not listen to us, because we were pointing out that an issue of social justice was involved. I thought they were supposed to care about such issues. I hoped that Ministers would listen to us, rather than respond as the then Economic Secretary did.

Mr. Webb: The Paymaster General mentioned pensions fraud when talking about social justice. Surely one of the biggest pensions frauds of recent years was the raiding of the pension fund of the bus employees, who are now pensioners. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Treasury to make a clear statement that it will not block attempts to get justice for those pensioners, as reported in *The Guardian* today?

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for that intervention because it shows one of the problems with the Government. One Minister is warring with another and they cannot make up their minds. That is what happened in this case. The previous Paymaster General said that he would review it and made promises to the House of Commons, but other Ministers did not follow through on that. The Deputy Prime Minister was clearly trying to bat for the bus employees, but he has been blocked by the Treasury.

After the initial debate in Committee on dividend tax credits on 22 July, the issue came back to the House on Report on 29 July, but we got no movement from the Government. It was then raised in Committee on 14 May 1998 as a result of initiatives by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. The Liberal Democrats supported him, with effective speeches coming from my hon. Friends the Members for Twickenham and for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett). I warned the Government that:

"We are talking about the most disadvantaged and vulnerable elderly people in our constituencies. Do Labour Members really want to impose a savage tax increase on those people?"

The good news was that we got a sign of movement. A professor—the hon. and learned Member for Dudley, North—said that the Government should look again at the issue. He seemed to have some influence with the then Paymaster General. Those of us who were on the Committee remember the discussions that they had on the Back Bench, seemingly stitching something up. We got the first glimpse of light from the Paymaster General when he said:

"Perhaps a case can be made for an overall limit on payable tax credits, which might be in the region that Age Concern described in its very good paper. That is not a promise; it is merely a promise to revert".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee E*, 14 May 1998; c. 190-94.]

When we reverted to the issue on Report on 30 June 1998, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton tabled a new clause. The debate brought forth another delphic pledge from the former Paymaster General. He said:

"I am also aware of the growing anxiety among poorer non-taxpayers who have been hit by the measure."

He added:

"We are looking at alternatives".—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 175.]

He did not make a promise—he was clear about that—but we felt that a nod was as good as a wink with him. We were hopeful that the review that he announced would produce something of substance. We were encouraged when Labour Back Benchers joined forces with Conservatives and Liberal Democrats on early-day motion 56, which gained more than 20 Labour signatures. Some of those Labour Members are present tonight. We have heard from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones). I see the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) here as well, who also signed the early-day motion.

It looked as though we were building up a head of steam, but there was continual delay and equivocation. Although we were pressing the Government in private

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meetings and letters—my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham sent a letter to the Prime Minister on 25 November—we were getting no response.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) asked the Prime Minister about the issue at Prime Minister's Question Time on 9 December. That seemed to prise out an answer. The answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham from the then Financial Secretary appeared on 10 December. As the right hon. Member for Wells said, that answer was brief and continued the discredited arguments that the Government had used in the past—that the removal of the tax credit was somehow about removing distortions and that alternative savings vehicles were acceptable and equivalent.

That answer broke the pledges that we felt we had secured. It went back on what pensioners thought the Government were doing. The Paymaster General said tonight that the Government had given pensioners a good deal of notice so that they could change their affairs, but then they set up a review. There was uncertainty about the Government's policy; only on 10 December was it made clear. In effect, there is only three or four months warning.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I seek confirmation of the Liberal Democrats' position. Is it simply to extend the 10 per cent. tax credit—which is already available to the group that we are talking about for five years under individual savings accounts—to beyond five years? Is that the extent of their great new policy?

Mr. Davey: Opposition Members would like to return to the situation before the 1997 Budget.

The Government's arguments do not bear analysis. Their first argument is that no one need lose because everyone can change to the new ISAs, which we have not yet seen. Ministers are not living in the real world, despite the Prime Minister's comments that the Government are pursuing the policies of the real world. I do not know whether the Paymaster General's elderly constituents in Bristol, South are sophisticated financial savers, but many of my constituents who come to me want help with council tax benefit forms or housing benefit forms. The forms worry them. My grandmother is 82, going on 83. She has osteoporosis and is partially sighted. She seeks my help just to pay her utility bills. Many elderly people cannot cope with the financial transactions required to make such shifts in their savings.

I was interested to read a report from the Chartered Institute of Taxation's low incomes tax reform group, published in December last year.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I have two brief questions. First, given the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the Liberal Democrats' preference for reverting to the previous situation, what would he do with advance corporation tax? Secondly, if people over the age of 80 are incapable of filling in forms, how do they reclaim their tax credits?

Mr. Davey: We have spoken to many groups—particularly the Chartered Institute of Taxation—which have said that they are more than happy to work with the Government and all parties in the House to produce a result that will protect the people about whom I am talking and would allow the Government's major policy to go forward. The former Paymaster General was having such discussions with hon. Members. I cannot accept the hon. Gentleman's point on that.

Many people have problems filling in forms. Clearly, some are able to claim the tax credit because they have been doing it for some years. The point is that they have got used to it. Many people do not benefit from the tax credit because they cannot fill in the forms. The hon. Gentleman's point does not follow through.

I recommend that the hon. Gentleman reads the report from the Chartered Institute of Taxation, which chose to study the taxation position of older taxpayers first among low income groups, because there are particular problems for that group. They have practical difficulties with filling in forms. They are not at work, so they have no payroll department from which to get advice. Many of them are not mobile, so they cannot go to tax offices for advice. The Inland Revenue's standard response is that it has free telephone lines. Many elderly people are hard of hearing. The report refers to the estimate of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People that 55 per cent. of people over 60 are deaf or hard of hearing, making telephone communication difficult, while 570,000 have severe or profound deafness that may need communication by text phone or video phone, which very few of them have. As well as having difficulty with mobility or hearing, some of those people are partially sighted.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Paymaster General pointed out that as a consequence of the Government's policy—the quid pro quo of taking away the tax concession—pensioners at least have the benefit of free eye tests.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but he will agree that those free eye tests do not make up for the loss of the tax credit.

Ordinary people who will be hit by this measure face difficulties in filling in tax returns. The Royal National Institute for the Blind reported that, in 1996, there were estimated to be about 950,000 people in the UK over 60 suffering from blindness or partial-sightedness—making it difficult for them to follow the tax guidance or fill in the forms.

Mr. Geraint Davies: It follows from what the hon. Gentleman is saying that owing to the many disabilities of the more mature people in our population, there should never be any changes to tax regulations on the basis that a change could not be understood by people who are becoming chronically deaf or blind.

Mr. Davey: That is not the logical consequence of what I am saying. The Government say that those people can move their savings that are currently held in shares into new savings schemes. My point is that, in the real world, it will be difficult for some of them, as they are not avid followers of the financial pages.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the previous Government's attempt to address

this very problem with the tax back campaign, which attempted to return to exactly the group of people whom the hon. Gentleman is describing some £560 million by means of national advertising and freephone telephone numbers? Does that not support the very point that he is making?

Mr. Davey: Yes. However, it is a shame that the previous Government took so long to get rid of composite rates on building societies. When they were abolished, that campaign was launched. Liberal Democrats had pressed the previous Government to get rid of that composite rate of tax for many years, but it took them a long time to get around to it. We welcomed it when they did do it.

My first point—[HON. MEMBERS: "First?"] The first point in this part of my speech concerns the proposed alternatives. For many people, these are not practical.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: If the hon. Lady does not mind, I want to make progress. Ministers are clearly worried that I am taking up a lot of time, and I apologise for that.

The Government's solution of people moving to ISAs will not work—this follows on from the point made by the hon. Member for Beckenham. The charges on joining an ISA are likely to be substantial. Even with the cost access terms standard and other simple schemes, according to the Age Concern briefing that I was given before the debate the charges are likely to more than outweigh the tax credit.

The cost of holding investments in an ISA is estimated at around 0.5 per cent. of the value of the shares in the ISA. The value of the shares that would have produced a tax credit of £75 per year for non-taxpaying pensioners would have been about £12,500, using the Treasury's estimates of the income from such shares. That means that holding those shares in an ISA would cost £62.50 per year. When the estimated start-up costs for an ISA of £125 are added, it becomes clear that the cost of transferring and holding investments in an ISA for those low-income pensioners will be more than the tax credit. The Government's argument that those pensioners need not lose out and will remain protected is simply wrong in fact and in practical reality.

Another argument in the parliamentary answer of 10 December is that the tax credit is a distortion and has to be abolished. That was debatable, but let us be charitable. Let us agree that, overall, the ACT system was distortive, pushing firms into higher dividend policies and away from retaining profits for growth. Let us accept that as a hypothesis.

The question for this debate is whether retaining the tax credit for 630,000 non-taxpayers keeps that distortion. That argument defies credibility. It is one thing to say that major pension funds demand higher dividends because of the tax system and can exercise influence on a firm's financial policies; it is quite another to say that children and the elderly—who make up most of those 630,000 people—will be so influential as to force firms to alter their financial planning. What percentage of UK plc is held by those 630,000 non-taxpayers?

The Government seem to think that chief executives and boards across the country are quaking at the thought of Aunt Agatha and her friends complaining that too much profit is being retained by the company. That is a total nonsense. The Government's answer on 10 December was a disgrace and showed that they have lost the argument. Ministers are trying to avoid that point and are saying that their generosity elsewhere to pensioners makes up the difference. The reality—as the motion makes clear in relation to other policies—is that it clearly does not.

I wish to refer to the minimum pension guarantee. A constituent phoned me this morning because she had read the article by the Prime Minister in the *News of the World* yesterday. She had read about the minimum pension guarantee and wanted to know whether her pension would go up. I asked her a few questions, and it was clear that it would not. The minimum pension guarantee refers to increases in income support, for which she is not eligible. We know that more than 1.1 million pensioners are eligible for income support but do not claim it, and almost 500,000 of those are women over the age of 75. Those pensioners are losing an average of £15 a week—or £780 a year. Another 600,000 pensioners' incomes fall below the income support level, but their small savings—perhaps just over £8,000—prevent them from benefiting from income support and from the Government's proposed minimum income guarantee. The minimum income guarantee will not help those people to offset the tax rise.

We welcome the Government's attempts and measures to improve the take-up of income support and we hope they work. However, why in the meantime are the Government taking away an average of £75 from many of the same pensioners—£75 which is taken up and which is extremely important? The policy goes against the Government's stated aims—aims which are far from being realised.

The other policy that the Government have pushed tonight is the winter fuel payment. This is a gimmick of a policy, and we should look at how much it is costing in bureaucracy. My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), with his usual forensic skills, has shown in questions to Social Security Ministers that by paying for the scheme in a one-off payment of £20—rather than a simple 40p a week on the basic pension—the extra bureaucracy is costing £12 million. On top of that, there is the need to spend £1.7 million to advertise the winter fuel payments. In other words, £14 million has been wasted on bureaucracy and advertising when restoring the tax credit would cost about £25 million. That shows the extent of the Government's support for pensioners and their priorities. The Government have mentioned free eye tests and concessionary fares, and we support those policies—we were the first to propose them.

The Government talk about tax guarantees, but no one knows what the Chancellor means. On 14 July, when he published the comprehensive spending review, he said:

> "We shall also set a tax guarantee that no pensioner will pay income tax unless their income rises above a specified level."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 193.]

That sounds excellent—but unless I have missed them, no details have been announced, not even in the

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"Partnership for Pensions" Green Paper before Christmas. In December, the Chartered Institute of Taxation's low incomes tax reform group commented:

"Mr. Brown provided no further explanation but presumably he meant something more than retaining the existing system of allowances at current levels, otherwise the undertaking would have been meaningless."

We all know that the Chancellor is the man of substance in the Government, so we eagerly await an explanation of his meaning about the tax guarantee. I hope that a Treasury Minister will enlighten us about that today. Otherwise, we suspect that the guarantee is meaningless.

I recommend to Ministers an idea proposed by the Chartered Institute of Taxation. It argues cogently for a new system of tax exemption certificates, granted every four years, which would be a pensioner's response to every Inland Revenue tax form and could perhaps become the embodiment of what the Chancellor means by a tax guarantee. Such a system would save a lot of heartache and worry among elderly people.

I want to be constructive and to propose prudent and effective policies to help the poorest pensioners. Liberal Democrats have suggested an increased and expanded age addition to the basic pension. We believe that we must support the elderly and give them dignity in retirement. We suggest an extra £3 a week for those over 75 and an extra £5 a week for those over 80, which would be taken up as all pensioners over 75 would benefit. That would put an end to the insulting extra 25p a week now given to those over 80.

The Government must start tackling poverty among pensioners. Labour should stop the new tax rise for pensioners and increase pensions, giving priority to those most in need.

8.31 pm

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (Knowsley, South): As Labour co-chairman of the all-party group on aging and older people, and a co-signatory of the early-day motion that has been referred to, I feel that I must contribute to this debate. That early-day motion was tabled before we had the promised clarification by the Paymaster General. It asked for that clarification and, naturally, requested an outcome in accordance with the reasons for seeking a review in the first place.

The Opposition motion is, rather lazily, based on that early-day motion, the signatories to which may not be happy to be associated with an attack on the Government for their decision, after the event. But I make no complaint about that: it is all part of the robust style of debate in the House, in which all parties indulge on different occasions.

I shall not indulge in point scoring or political embarrassment, but I once again make a reasoned appeal to the Government on this matter. I wrote to my hon. Friend the Paymaster General after the clarification was announced in December. Will the Government, even at this late stage, consider the point that, as the tax credit will remain payable in respect of dividends paid on investment in ISAs and PEPs until 2004, and for up to seven years for charities, it does not seem logical that it cannot be paid to UK resident non-taxpayers during that same period?

It is only non-taxpayers who lose income because of the decision. In July 1997, the Inland Revenue even went to the extent of ensuring that higher-rate taxpayers did not suffer as a result of the reduction of the tax credit to 10 per cent. Non-taxpayers—those on the lowest incomes, as has fairly been pointed out—will lose income from April 1999. That does not make logical sense to me.

Two thirds of pensioners pay no tax, so tax-free savings are an inappropriate and unnecessary compensatory mechanism for them. The cost implications of transferring investment to ISAs are liable to outweigh any benefit from retaining the 10 per cent. tax credit, because the start-up costs are so great and there are limits on how much can be transferred into an ISA in any one year.

I hear the arguments about the macro-economic benefits to the Treasury accruing from the adjustments to advance corporation tax, and the arguments that have been rehearsed many times by my hon. Friend the Paymaster General about the alternative shelters for investments, but I ask the Treasury to consider the puny £25 million that it would cost to restore the tax credit facility for non-taxpayers, as against the £5.4 billion accruing to the Treasury from the overall adjustments to tax credits.

I ask the Treasury, even at this late stage, to consider the fact that some old people manage their own investments. I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) said about people being senile, deaf and blind, but there are old people in the real world who manage their own investments and may not be able or disposed to reorder their investments into ISAs as has been suggested, which may in any case not even be cost-effective.

I urge the Government to consider whether UK resident non-taxpayers should be able to continue to claim the reduced tax credit of 10 per cent. on their investment income after 6 April 1999. As a minimum, they should be allowed to claim the tax credit until 2004, when it will be phased out for PEPs and ISAs, or until 2006, when it will be phased out for charities.

In all friendship and reason, at this late stage, I make that appeal to the Government. Whatever the outcome of this debate, I shall continue to appeal to their reason, good will and generosity of spirit on this matter.

8.38 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I congratulate the hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) on a brave and principled speech. He has thought through his arguments carefully and put them before the House with clarity. He made a telling point at the end of his speech, reminding us that this is certainly not the last drop saloon for this issue. If the Government are unmoved to change their mind, even at this late stage, as he said, there will still be an opportunity for the matter to be revisited on each and every Finance Bill of this Parliament, as we attempt to change the Treasury's view.

I was planning to make a very short speech, but I have to respond to one or two of the Paymaster General's comments. It was sad that she was not prepared to face the music of financial analysis; otherwise, I would have reminded her that, when I held the post that she held until recently—Financial Secretary—I considered the differences between classical corporation tax systems and those such as ours, based on the imputation system.

Many of the arguments now made in strict economic terms to justify the change simply did not stand up, according to the arguments of the Treasury officials: the same officials who now advise the Government. They pointed out to me that the biggest single economy in the world that works on a classical corporation tax system—that of the United States—has a higher level of distributed profits than the United Kingdom economy.

It is a bizarre idea that, by recreating a classical system in this country, there will be a magical improvement in economic activity. That is for the birds. The former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), made many trips to the United States to learn how it was that that economy was so vibrant and healthy in terms of growth and job creation—in short, how it managed to do exactly what Treasury Ministers claim will be achieved by the Government's policies to change the tax system. In economic terms, the Government's arguments do not add up.

The second charge made by the former Financial Secretary was that the previous Conservative Government did nothing to support savers. I remind Ministers that one of our best achievements was to change the tax system so that many pensioners became non-taxpayers—one reason for our being here tonight. We also worked hard on TESSAs and PEPs, and we did much to help saving and the ethic of saving in this country.

However, I shall focus on some of the wider consequences of the change. We have talked about its impact on pensioners, and the Government have argued that people can make compensatory adjustments to their financial position and income flow. I have studied a group of institutions that find it incredibly difficult to make such adjustments, but whose investments service the needs of their pensioners.

I started with the Church of England, and the Economic Secretary might be interested to know that, in answer to a question from me, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell), in his role as Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners, said:

"At their 1997 dividend levels, the Commissioners estimate that the removal of payable tax credits will ultimately reduce their income and their total investment returns by £12 million annually."

Each and every year, therefore, the Church of England will have to find another £12 million. Grossing up that figure to include other Churches, I estimate that this country's Churches, all of which have a responsibility for former clergy, will be about £40 million down as a result of this mean-minded measure.

A closer examination of the effect on Church pension funds of the change reveals that, again according to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, it

"will also reduce returns on the newly established contributory pensions scheme, which meets pension liabilities for service from 1998 onwards, which is administered by the Church of England Pensions Board."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 53.]

Will the Economic Secretary say how the Church of England is supposed to extract from the already limited money in its Sunday morning collection plates an extra £12 million every year? It cannot adapt to those conditions easily, but perhaps the Minister believes that the widow's mite will make up for the Treasury's meanness.

I also checked the effect of the policy on other Churches. For the Roman Catholics, Monsignor John Moore said a submission to the Treasury had been made to point out the folly of its ways—perhaps the Catholics hoped that a sinner would repent, even at such a late hour. However, Monsignor Moore said the measure would cause a "considerable loss" for his Church's pension funds.

It is clear that the entire Christian community will stack up against the policy, but the effect is not limited to the Christian Churches. Those who are of the Jewish persuasion are already employing actuarial experts to work out the impact for them. Fundraising in these areas is most difficult, yet the Government have decided to hit them hard.

Finally, the effects go beyond what will be felt by the Churches and there will be a substantial impact in the world of charity. The Government talk about looking after the least well off and those deserving of help, but the Treasury received a collective submission from the charities which pointed out that the effect of removing the payable tax credits was a reduction in resources of about £400 million a year. The charities calculated that that was equivalent, given their annual turnover of £12 billion, to a total cut of 3 per cent. and that it doubles the amount already taken through the irrecoverable VAT inputs.

That is a fine record for a Labour Government in regard to those groups that are least able to do anything about their income. Such groups try to help the worst off in society, and give comfort and succour to those in need. The reward that they get is that the Government take away their money.

8.45 pm

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): I begin by welcoming my hon. Friend the Paymaster General to her post. Although she is not at present in the Chamber, I know that in the past she has shouldered much of the burden of Finance Bills: her hard work means that she deserves her promotion.

The Government are right to abolish advance corporation tax and foreign income dividends, and to phase out dividend tax credits. I must resist the temptation to engage in economic debate with the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), but I am persuaded that a modern corporation tax system with in-year payments will remove previous distortions in the market. In the long run, it will lead to greater investment in British business.

The Conservative Government broke the link between pensions and earnings. They were also responsible for pensions mis-selling and for taking away free eye tests. Until the Labour Opposition stopped them, they would have doubled VAT on fuel as well. It is a bit rich, therefore, for Conservative Members to argue that they are standing up for the rights of pensioners. Already, after only 20 months in office, it is clear that this Labour Government care for pensioners and want to do something practical to help the poorest pensioners in our society. The minimum income guarantee for pensioners, lower fuel bills, the state second pension and stakeholder pensions—all those initiatives show that Labour are delivering on election promises.

The facts in the debate are a little out of date but not seriously in dispute. About 300,000 non-taxpaying pensioners receive a dividend credit of about

[Mr. Ian Pearson]

£75 on average. That average implies a saving fund of about £12,500. Pensioners probably will have got their money through a building society demutualisation, or through investments in one or two privatisations whose shares they have kept as savings in their own accounts. About 160,000 non-taxpaying pensioners have a dividend tax credit of £50 or less.

Does it matter? I suggest that the average of £75 per year that the non-taxpaying pensioners will lose is significant.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pearson: In a minute. The minimum income guarantee is of £75 a week for a single pensioner, so we are talking about a loss equivalent to one week's earnings for a poor pensioner. That is an important amount for people on low incomes and we need to think carefully about what to do about it.

Mr. Syms: No doubt the hon. Gentleman has received letters from pensioners complaining about the change. In his replies to them, has he called the change insignificant?

Mr. Pearson: The hon. Gentleman must have misheard me, I said that the change is significant and that the Government must consider what to do about it. I listened to my hon. Friend the Paymaster General with great interest when she talked about alternative saving vehicles. The ones that exist are relatively straightforward. At present, they are either PEPs or TESSAs, which in the future will become ISAs. It is clear that, in relation to a fund size of £12,500, the average costs of management charges at 0.5 per cent. will more than swallow the benefits to be gained by sheltering half the dividend tax credit in one of the new ISAs.

The Government appear to be saying that small shareholdings of £12,500 are not appropriate for people on low incomes and that they would be better placed as individuals getting tax relief by putting their money in a building society or some other savings vehicle, because they can at least claim the tax benefit from doing so, whereas if they invest in the equity market, they cannot. I am not sure that that is a message that we should be sending to poor non-taxpaying pensioners, but it appears to be the logical conclusion to draw from the Government's actions.

I am worried that, despite the many Government actions to help pensioners, the measures that we are debating will appear to many pensioners to be mean-minded and unfair. The issue will not go away and the Government should reconsider.

8.51 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Albeit in her absence, I congratulate the Paymaster General on her promotion. I sympathise with her attempts to defend that which most hon. Members believe to be quite indefensible. I shall refer to the arguments she used, but it must be said that there can be no justification for worsening the position of those who, by definition, are badly off, for they do not pay tax. By removing what small income they receive, the position of those pensioners is worsened relative to most other pensioners. All pensioners receive a fuel allowance, but the pensioners affected by the measure—those who have capital—will not benefit from income support. My constituency contains many such pensioners—people who never had an occupational pension, who spent their careers about the world and who have retired to my area. Many of them are not well off and fall into the category of pensioners who are affected by the measure.

I cannot understand the justification for the abolition of advance corporation tax—the whole argument is totally bogus. Everyone knows that the change was made to increase tax revenue by £5 billion per annum, at the expense of pension funds. Every economist knows that it is nonsense to argue that investment increases if the money is left with companies rather than distributed, and if the market is left to decide how it is to be reinvested. The result of the changes is that the savings rate has fallen from 10.4 per cent. to 7.2 per cent. As everyone knows, in the long term, investment is a function of savings; therefore, as the savings rate in this country falls, so does investment. Smokescreens and distortions have been thrown around what is essentially a tax-gathering change; and in an obscure little area, in a mean and doctrinaire measure, a tax credit benefiting a particular category of not-well-off pensioner that cost only £25 million per annum has been abolished.

The reason why the Government have refused to give way is not administrative—as we know, form R85 could deal perfectly easily with the situation. They refuse because the sort of elderly person who has a few shares does not appeal to the Government—they do not see such pensioners as their supporters and cannot derive from doing something for such pensioners the sort of propaganda hype that can be spun from winter fuel payments and alleged income guarantees. The pensioners who are affected by the Government's changes are independent people, self-respecting, often elderly widows—not the sort of people who fit into the Government's preferred role model. The Government believe that they are not worth bothering about, even though the cost of helping them would be minuscule.

I cannot understand how a Government headed by a Prime Minister who claims that a fair society is a priority can do such a thing. I cannot understand how the Paymaster General could have believed any of what she said this evening. I call on the Government to get over their pride, and end a policy that is hugely unfair and that falls on those who are least able to afford it in their old age. It makes nonsense of everything the Government claim to stand for to do something like that.

8.55 pm

Ms Ruth Kelly (Bolton, West): I have recently had occasion to reflect on the subject of the debate and find it astonishing that the Opposition should have chosen the Government's actions in respect of pensioners as their line of attack. As my hon. Friend the Paymaster General said, the Opposition do not have an honourable record on the subject. To call themselves the friends of the pensioner, when the Conservative Government were involved in the huge pensions mis-selling scandal in which 600,000 people at or near retirement were mis-sold pensions, is a bit rich. However, I shall do them the courtesy of concentrating my arguments tonight specifically on the

rationale behind the abolition of tax credits on dividends and on the Labour Government's overall strategy on the economy and pensioners.

Let me start with the tragedy of the persistent under-investment that has afflicted the British economy. Too often, British companies have invested too little, too late in the economic cycle. One does not have to look far to see some of the reasons: the pattern of booms and busts, intensified during 18 years of Tory rule; economic uncertainty; and inflation gripping the system. Another less-noticed reason—albeit not an obscure little area, as the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) put it—was the desperately outdated tax system. That system meant that pension funds—the most important investor group—stood to gain more if the company paid out a dividend than if it retained or invested its profits; and, as dividends were tax exempt, the funds could claim back the tax, all of which caused a major economic distortion.

As the professor of finance, Janette Rutterford, wrote in *The Guardian* in June 1997, shortly before the Budget changes:

"No wonder that UK companies top the global dividend yield tables. The corporate tax system positively encourages pay-outs. The solution is to remove the refund for tax-exempt shareholders."

I agree. What the Labour Government have to do is create a climate in which the level of investment is raised. It should be up to companies to take appropriate decisions, based on economic merits, on whether to pay out dividends to their shareholders or to benefit from growth in capital values as they reinvest in the business.

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Kelly: I should like to make some progress first—time is limited.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) made a comparison with the United States, which I found somewhat surprising. There is a similar system there whereby pension funds take decisions on the basis of economic merits, not tax advantage. However, I disagree completely with his argument. Sir David Cooksey examined emerging companies in the United States and looked at the performance of companies since 1975. He found that the companies that had grown and thrived were those that had invested and not those that had paid out dividends. I think that the abolition of this measure will help companies by offering them higher long-term growth and ensuring that the tax system does not starve them of capital.

Mr. Jack: How does the hon. Lady square her criticism of my remarks with the fact that there is a higher level of distributed profits in the United States than in the United Kingdom? Although less profit is retained within companies, the US has a much more sustained higher level of growth and lower unemployment than our economy. How does the hon. Lady explain that?

Ms Kelly: The right hon. Gentleman has missed my point. The successful US companies that have grown and thrived are those that have invested in their companies and not those that have distributed their profits.

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the hon. Lady believe that abolishing tax credit for pensioners will help to remove the distortion? Surely retaining the tax credit would not create a distortion.

Ms Kelly: I shall address precisely how pensioner poverty should be tackled. My point is that there is a huge economic distortion in the tax system which encourages companies to distribute their profits rather than invest them.

The abolition of the dividend tax credit is only one strand of Labour's reform package. The Paymaster General set out the whole package that is designed to encourage investment, growth and employment, highlighting in particular the reductions in corporation tax to a level lower than that of our major competitors and the abolition of the advance corporation tax in its entirety, which was another major tax bias which distorted investment decisions.

I am aware that some non-taxpayers have been affected by the abolition of tax credits. However, the Opposition's argument that the tax credit should be restored or alleviated—the motion is quite difficult to understand—completely misunderstands the purpose of the tax system. Let us examine how the system is used and how it currently operates. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I become a little technical.

Under the previous system, the principal responsibility for paying tax on dividends rested with the company that paid dividends, rather than with the individual or the organisation that received them. If a company decided to pay out some of its profits in share dividends, it had to pay advance corporation tax on that money. Individual investors received a credit with their dividend payments that stated that advance corporation tax had been paid and gave them a credit with the Inland Revenue for the amount paid on their dividends. In fact, the advance corporation tax charge was set at exactly the amount that basic rate taxpayers would pay, thus ensuring that tax was not paid twice—a point recognised by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory).

However, the argument for individuals whose income falls below the tax threshold is completely different. They can claim the tax credit as a cash payment from the Inland Revenue, but, if the non-taxpayer is not liable to pay tax, there is no double taxation. The House of Commons Library states:

"By allowing non-taxpayers to cash in their credits—and giving non-taxpayers money to repay a tax they have not paid in the first place—the tax credit system is doing something for which it was never intended: supplementing the income of non-taxpayers."

It is hard to believe that the Opposition are suggesting reintroducing a tax bias to the system that distorts long-term investment decisions made by companies and pension funds, in order to help poor pensioners. *The Daily Telegraph*—not a natural Labour supporter—recognised that point clearly after the July 1997 Budget. It stated:

"The quality of life in retirement . . . depends on growth in the economy, reflected in the prices of shares where the contributor's money is invested. This is the point of the Brown budget that the pension funds would do well to grasp."

I suggest that the Opposition would do well to grasp it too. The best way to help pensioners surely is to assist them indirectly through better growth in the economy and directly, if necessary, by supplementing their income. That is what the Government are doing.

I will not run through all of the measures that we have taken to help pensioners since gaining office in May 1997—no doubt they will be well discussed during the debate. I shall mention only two. For the poorest pensioners, our new minimum income guarantee will ensure a minimum of £75 a week for single pensioners

[Ms Kelly]

and almost £117 for pensioner couples. We have saved pensioners an average of £108 a year on their fuel bills—the poorest pensioners will save £140—by cutting VAT on fuel, introducing winter fuel payments and abolishing the gas levy and through our tougher regulation of gas and electricity prices. That contrasts with the actions of the previous Tory Government, who put 8 per cent. VAT on fuel and tried to double it to 17.5 per cent. I think that that puts this motion in a little context.

9.3 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I apologise to the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson). If I had listened a little longer before I intervened, I would have realised that he was making a courageous speech. I am so used to Labour Members defending the indefensible that I misinterpreted what was probably a difficult speech for the hon. Gentleman. He has no doubt received many letters on this topic and his contribution to the debate demonstrates his concern about the subject.

We have heard a great deal about reforming and improving tax systems, but there is no such thing as a perfect tax system—all distort to some extent. The key point about the change to advance corporation tax is that, at the end of the day, the Government will have an extra £5 billion a year in revenue to spend in other ways. It is surprising that every reform to make this country more efficient seems to generate additional tax for the Government, whether in corporation tax, ACT or another form of taxation. I am not sure that that will make business more efficient. It will lead the Government to spend more where they should not spend.

The key point about the reform is that, as when one tries to reform any tax system, there are winners and losers. Most Governments, irrespective of party, tend to be sensitive to the fact that there may be people who cannot afford to be losers. When my constituents started writing to me about the changes, many of them could not believe that the effects were what the Government intended. They wrote, "There must be a mistake. I am not particularly well off. I have a few shares. They generate a little income for me which makes a material difference to my life. Please, as a Member of Parliament, write to the Treasury and point that out."

This matter was debated during Budget debates and in Committee, and at one stage the Government acknowledged that they might want to reconsider it. The Opposition are surprised that the Government have not made modest proposals to deal with the problem. As we heard earlier, 300,000 non-taxpaying pensioners have each lost £75 a year and the cost of the measure to the Exchequer is about £25 million. However, the tax change means that the Government are collecting an additional £5 billion, so it does not seem to be unreasonable to address the pensioners' loss. Treasuries and Governments raise a lot of money and then give back a small amount to try to ensure that people who cannot afford the change receive a little help. We are discussing a measure that affects 300,000 non-taxpaying pensioners and 330,000 non-taxpayers who may be earning very little or who do not work but are not of pensionable age. They are losing an average of £75, so some people are losing much more.

Many people's personal financial position is conditioned to some extent by the historic position of their family. We are talking not about sharp, smart people who pay a lot for advice on arranging their affairs, but about people, some of whom are in their 70s or 80s, who have perhaps inherited a few shares from their father, mother or aunt. Some people have written to me saying that they have an emotional attachment to their few shares because that is all they received from their family. They want to retain that investment; they do not want to be told that they have to sell the shares and consider alternatives.

As we heard in the intervention by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), when one sells shares, one pays a price, such as capital gains tax. One can put shares into individual savings accounts, which provide limited tax relief, but there are management charges. There is not an alternative for many people who want only to have a small investment with a small income and to live their lives in retirement with dignity.

The Government have done themselves no favours by not acknowledging that there is a problem and by making no move to deal with that problem. All Governments make a fetish of always getting their way—the previous Conservative Government did so on occasion—and in the end, people think that the Government are not listening. The Government are not listening to people's views on this matter. They have a large majority and there is no doubt that they will carry the vote tonight.

The measure will affect the lives of many of my constituents. I have received many letters about the proposal. I have a somewhat elderly constituency. Some of my constituents are very wealthy, but many are retired and are trying to live on their few investments. Some are asset rich in that they have houses and flats, but they need those to live in and do not particularly want to sell them. They try to make do with their small income.

The Government have done themselves no favours with this measure. I listened to the Paymaster General, who did not deal with any of the points raised by the debate. That is a great pity, because I might respect the Government if they honestly addressed the issues. The hon. Lady went round the houses and gave a litany of points about everything but the problem that the measure will create for pensioners, which is a great pity.

We have heard about the early-day motion that was tabled. Many Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members have signed it. That is a sign of some strength of feeling, to which I had hoped the Government would pay some attention. There is a real issue, which is affecting people's lives. Some people who have never written to their Member of Parliament felt that they must put pen to paper because their lives and circumstances were threatened.

The Government still have an opportunity to make some concessions towards these relatively poor individuals, who want dignity and income. They want to keep their shares, some of which they have had for a while. If, when we vote, the Government have not made any concession, I hope that some Labour Members will stand up for what they believe and join us in the Lobby. We may not win the day, but I believe that we will win the argument on an issue that is important to so many of our constituents.

9.10 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): I have listened very carefully to the debate, but remain unconvinced by Opposition Members—not least the hon. Member for

Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, who took the best part of 27 minutes to "unconvince" me.

It is very easy to take in isolation one measure, however important, in an extremely complex area, without explaining the whole story across government. It is very easy to give erroneous impressions by dwelling on one aspect of policy in one area. Given Opposition Members' speeches, it is clearly easy to scaremonger, worry and suggest that there are no alternatives. There is almost a mantra to the Opposition's policy: "If we say often enough that there is no alternative, there may not be any alternative." Opposition Members have not, in any shape or form, answered the fundamental case put by the Paymaster General. It is very easy to do all those things, but it is also quite shameful.

Many Opposition Members are using this issue to give people cause for concern. Their time and energy—not least, given some of their professional backgrounds—would have been, and still will be, better spent helping the people who are affected by the change to alter their investment patterns. The point about the range of other vehicles that can be utilised has not been discredited. Opposition Members have said often enough that it has been discredited, but have not sufficiently proved the charge that there is no alternative. The fact that St. Margaret used to say that there is no alternative, does not automatically mean that such a response can be invoked at any time in order to change an argument.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: No, I have precious little time and others are still waiting to speak. The hon. Gentleman can have a cup of tea with me after the debate.

As has been suggested, the measure removes a distortion, and needs to be seen in the context of discouraging companies from distributing profits and encouraging them to reinvest. Again, that charge has not been answered—certainly not by the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly). The right hon. Gentleman's little foray into American business history showed more about his lack of knowledge of it than otherwise. The case has been well made for the need to restore investment levels and to develop economic policy for the future. In that context, Opposition Members' comments at the beginning of the debate, which seems so long ago now, about Labour forgetting the working class and being interested only in the middle class were facile and fatuous.

In considering this policy, we must appreciate the reality of the Government's action on pensions. Although I do not doubt that many of the cases read out by Conservative Members on 30 June—I have read through them quite assiduously—were true, they did not offer anything like half the story of what people may lose if they do not opt for alternatives, and what they will gain in other areas of policy on which the Government are working. To suggest only half the story, but to paint it as the whole story, does not do the constituents of Opposition Members that much of a favour.

Every item detailed by Labour Members has been ridiculed or pooh-poohed by Opposition Members. We were told by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton—probably in the 22nd minute of his 27-minute peroration—that winter payments for pensioners are a gimmick. He was asked several times—admittedly, from a sedentary position—whether, in that case, the Liberals would abolish the current arrangements. There was no answer, so we must assume that it was only a gimmick. It was so irrelevant to the Liberals that they could not be bothered to table an amendment to the motion.

On 30 June 1998, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb)—in between writing his stunning little column for *Accountancy Age*—said that fuel was crucial to poorer pensioners. Opposition Members made no mention of the fact that pensioners would gain £108 to £140 a year in fuel payments—far more than they would lose if they stayed in their current savings vehicle. During the passage of the Bill that became the Finance (No. 2) Act 1998, an Opposition Member said that the debate on the subject was another red herring.

The only mention that was made of the £21 billion invested in the national health service was a cack-handed attempt at "Brucean" economics by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. During his 27 minutes, he tried to say that £21 billion equals £1.5 billion, and that we are spending the £1.5 billion only because the Liberals pressured us to. That is nonsense.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: I cannot, I am afraid. I have told you before: we shall have a cup of tea afterwards.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The occupant of the Chair would no doubt be very pleased to be able to have a cup of tea, but the hon. Gentleman knows that that is impossible. His remarks are being addressed to me.

Mr. McNulty: I apologise profusely, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Strangely, there was only ridicule about free eye tests. Nothing was said about the £3 billion programme to improve home residential care programmes, which is just the start of what we are doing, especially for the very elderly, in that regard. Nothing was said about the White Paper proposals on concessionary travel for all pensioners.

Nothing was said about benefit take-up, apart from a facile little comment by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on 30 June 1998, which seemed to suggest that pensioners who desperately needed benefits lacked virtue if they took them up. He spoke sneeringly of their having to rely on the welfare state instead of supporting themselves. If he was present—which he was for much of the evening—I would remind him that all those pensioners paid their dues time and again to the welfare state, and that it is not a matter of shame that they take that money back again, but their due right. If that is what they need into their late old age, we should encourage that.

I shall not dwell on the other half of the equation—not mentioned in the motion or in interventions—concerning future pensioners. The world having stopped and then started again for Conservative Members in the year zero, 1 May 1997, they have no idea what the future is about,

[Mr. McNulty]

other than next week's headlines and hoping that William does better at the next Question Time than he did at the previous one.

In Committee on the Bill that became the Finance (No. 2) Act 1998, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham spoke about

"the culprits and perpetrators of the crime, who sit on the Labour Benches."—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 168.]

If there are those who perpetrate crime in this regard, they do not sit, and in the past have not sat, on Labour Benches.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) tells us that we shall be judged on the decision that we take. Well, I hope that we are judged on the totality of the decisions that we take, if only in terms of those short items about VAT on fuel and what we are doing for the lowest-paid pensioners. Opposition Members will be judged on the record of their time in government; not on their rhetoric—a word that an Opposition Member used at Question Time today, emphasising the second syllable instead of the first—but on their action over the past 18 years. In that regard, they are still found wanting.

I urge all those on whom this measure impacts the most to look at everything that the Government are doing in this area, not just at dividend tax credits, and remember that Conservative Members are no friends to pensioners. They were not during the past 18 years, and despite their weasel words they are certainly no friend of pensioners now.

9.19 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I shall be brief because the issues are of a narrow compass and we have been going for nearly two hours. The debate is bizarre. Ministers have not addressed the points in the Opposition motion. It says, very straightforwardly, that from April 1999, nearly a third of a million non-taxpaying pensioners and a third of a million other non-taxpayers will lose an average of £75 each because of the Government's decision to abolish the dividend tax credit. At no stage did the Paymaster General or anyone else on the Government Benches say that that statement was inaccurate, fallacious or in any way wrong.

The motion further notes that

"80,000 of the pensioners affected will lose over £100 per year".

That figure has not been challenged, so presumably it is correct—

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Baldry: No. I shall be brief. The hon. Lady wants to get in, I think.

The motion goes on to state that

"it is unacceptable that basic rate taxpayers and higher rate taxpayers are unaffected directly by this decision which affects only non-taxpayers".

There has been no explanation from the Paymaster General or anyone else as to why such circumstances have come about.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Baldry: I will give way to the hon. Lady, but she is taking up time from her own speech.

Ms Keeble: Thank you. Much has been made of the fact that people stand to lose £75, which is the amount that they gain in tax credit. However, my reading of your motion is that you are not proposing to reinstate—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has been in the House long enough to know that she is addressing the Chair when she says "you".

Ms Keeble: I apologise. The hon. Gentleman has not dealt with the point that his party does not propose to reinstate the full amount of the tax credit, but speaks of some £37.50.

Mr. Baldry: My point, which is not disputed and which the hon. Lady confirms, is that pensioners will lose £75, on average. That has not been challenged.

I read the Government's amendment to see what conceivable explanation there is. Having been in the House for 15 years, I assume that there must be some rational explanation. The Government amendment deals at length with income support, which may be welcome, but it does not necessarily relate to the non-taxpaying pensioners who will lose out.

The only justification in the Government amendment that possibly addresses the point is the statement that

"the Government has removed major company taxation distortions".

I hope that when she winds up the debate, the Minister will help me to understand how, in my constituency surgery, I should explain to pensioners who have some small income from dividends and who are non-taxpayers that they will lose money each year—tough—because the Government have removed major company taxation distortions.

The simple fact is that as a consequence of that action, a significant number of pensioners will be worse off, and nothing that we have heard this evening from the Government Benches has attempted to disguise that. The only suggestion that we have heard is that those pensioners could perhaps put their money into some other form of savings. That ignores the fact that for people in their 70s or 80s who own a few shares, that is not a realistic proposition in view of the management charges and all the other administration.

I hope that the Minister will explain to the House how it can be right that only non-taxpayers are hit, and that they are hit because of some mantra about a major company taxation distortion being removed. That point has not been addressed by those on the Government Benches this evening. Until they do so, many people will feel that the Government have failed pensioners.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) made the valid comment that exemptions are granted for bank dividends and savings dividends, so why should there not be exemptions for such company dividends? What is so special about those?

The Government have had ample time during the debate to address those issues. They have failed to do so. I hope that the Minister will deal with them in her winding-up speech.

9.24 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I, too, am amazed that despite the wording of our motion, the Government's amendment does not address it. The speeches that we have heard tonight have not dealt with our arguments.

A small amount of Government revenue is involved, yet it is made up of sums that are extremely significant to some of the poorer pensioners. It is hard to believe that any Government would set out to penalise the poorest in society. I, for one, hope that that is not the Government's intention and that they will change their mind on that policy.

The removal of advance corporation tax is a short-sighted act that has many knock-on costs, and it will hit many people and many organisations. The scrapping of personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts is an unnecessary and unsettling change. They are popular schemes and are open to everybody, and they seem to have been scrapped simply for change's sake. The removal of dividend tax credits from the poorest pensioners and non-taxpayers is yet another totally unnecessary act.

These changes will affect many people—the poorest pensioners, future pensioners and ordinary savers—and organisations such as Churches, charities and local councils, but the principal point is that they will also hit companies; and hit them in the way that the Government say they will not. The Government say that they want to encourage investment, but as far as I can make out the measure will reduce investment in industry and in business.

For example, if there are no tax advantages, why should organisations and people—especially poorer people—invest their money where an element of risk is involved? The tax advantage, through ACT credits and tax relief on dividends, makes that risk acceptable. The change may persuade non-taxpayers to put their money where it is completely safe, but that would deny that investment to industry and business.

The Government seem to be somewhat embarrassed by the changes that they have made. First, many Labour and Liberal Democrat Members have signed the early-day motion, which is almost identical to our motion. Secondly, last June the then Paymaster General said:

> "I am aware also of the growing anxiety among poorer non-taxpayers who have been hit by the measure".—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 175.]

The Chancellor himself talked about not introducing the change until 1999, to allow people to reinvest—precisely the point that I am making. People will take money out of equities and out of industry and reinvest somewhere else.

The Government look to be further embarrassed by the difficulty with replying to letters we have written on behalf of constituents. I wrote to the Chancellor about this issue on 22 July 1998. In spite of chasing him for a reply many times, I have yet to receive a reply. The Government seem to be extremely embarrassed by the measure; because of that—and, more so, because it would be the right thing to do—I hope that they reverse it.

9.28 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to the debate. I shall focus on two points, in particular one that has not been discussed fully, although it was referred to in passing by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey).

One of my constituents, from Walker road in Maidenhead, came to my surgery recently. She was very concerned, because she had suddenly discovered the issue of dividend tax credits and that, as a non-taxpaying pensioner shareholder, she would suffer to the tune of several hundred pounds as a result of the Government's policy.

My constituent was outraged at the Government's policy. She thought it quite appalling that the Government should tax non-taxpayers in such a way, but she also mentioned her concern that many non-taxpaying shareholders in such a position are still not aware of the Government's policy or of the way in which their finances will be hit by it.

There is an issue in respect of lack of publicity. Many hon. Members raised the concerns with the Government in the summer, of pensioner constituents but, because of the comments of the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), the former Paymaster General, we assumed that the Government had seen the error of their ways and would change their policy to ensure that non-taxpaying pensioners would not lose out.

I wrote many letters to constituents saying that the Government had expressed their sympathy and would review the position. My constituents wrote back saying how pleased they were to hear that.

We now realise that the Government cynically left a period of months during which they thought the issue would go away and that people would not notice, and then, shortly before Christmas, they sneaked out the announcement that they intended to stick to their original policy. Many of my constituents and others who are currently non-taxpayers will be appalled by the fact that they will have to pay tax as a result of the Government's policy. They will lose out financially, but, as the shadow Chief Secretary said, many of them may not discover that fact until April 2000. They will wonder what on earth the Government were doing and why they did not listen to the concerns expressed.

Secondly, we heard an extraordinary peroration from the Paymaster General. We had a circuitous tour of Government policies and of the various economic objectives that the Government have claimed for themselves. It did not take the Paymaster General long before she used those good old words "boom and bust", which we hear in virtually every Minister's speech. She completely failed to answer the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). He asked how on earth the Government can claim that they will meet those economic objectives and ensure that we never again have boom and bust in our economy in any shape or form purely by taxing non-taxpaying pensioners, who are some of the poorest pensioners, to the tune of £25 million. I trust that the Economic Secretary will answer that question.

9.32 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo) on her promotion to Paymaster General.

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

Although in Opposition time, this is not a party political debate—it is the Commons versus the Executive. The House of Commons is performing its duty to tell the Government that they have done something wrong. The cross-party motion that led to the debate was signed by 110 Members, including 29 Liberal Democrats and 28 Labour Members, all of whom believe that the Government are wrong on this issue.

Ms Kelly: If the Opposition believe that this measure is deeply flawed, would they reimpose the tax credit?

Mr. Gibb: The debate is about Government activity. We want this tax credit to be extended to 2004 as a minimum. Ideally, we would like the full credit to remain at 20 per cent. and not to be abolished for non-taxpaying pensioners. It is wrong to end the repayment of dividend tax credits to 300,000 non-taxpaying pensioners. It is wrong to confiscate an average of £75 a year from people who can least afford to lose that amount. It is wrong of the Treasury to argue, as the Paymaster General did in her press release, that these people have

"time to consider their investments before the new rules take effect, for example, moving to tax-favoured investments should they wish to do so."

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gibb: No, I shall not give way, because I want to make progress.

This measure is wrong because the 300,000 people concerned are not highly sophisticated investors who consider their investments. They are elderly people on very low incomes with a few privatisation or windfall shares. They have come to rely on the tax credit refund that they claim every year. It is wrong of the Government to tell them to sell their shares and to buy gilts, or to transfer their shares to an ISA, the charges relating to which will be more than the tax credit they are losing. This measure affects people of an age and at a time when they will never be able to earn or to save enough money to make up the loss.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said that the minimum income guarantee alluded to by the Paymaster General does not protect the incomes of people who have savings in excess of £8,000 and so will not qualify for income support.

The hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara), who chairs the all-party group for older people, made a reasoned and well-argued appeal to the Government, pointing out that, in July 1997, special efforts were made to ensure that basic and higher-rate taxpayers would not lose out from the changes to tax credits. He also pointed out that two thirds of pensioners did not pay tax at all, and that tax-free savings vehicles were therefore inappropriate for most pensioners. He also made the point that the cost of ISAs would probably outweigh any benefit to be gained from putting shares into such vehicles.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) made the excellent point that the idea that returning the United Kingdom corporation tax system to the classical system that exists in the United States would reduce the level of dividend payments was nonsense, given that the United States has a much higher dividend-payment ratio than the United Kingdom. He also drew attention to the effect that this mean-minded measure would have on the Church's income, resulting in some £12 million less for the Church of England and £400 million less for the charity sector as a whole.

The hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson), formerly parliamentary private secretary to the former Paymaster General, expressed the same sympathy for the cause as his former boss. He believes that the measure may well appear mean-minded and unfair to those affected by it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) pointed out the nonsense of the Government's description of the abolition of dividend tax credits as some kind of beneficial corporation tax reform, saying that in reality—as everyone knows—it was simply a major tax revenue-raising measure. The hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly) made a valiant attempt to defend the indefensible, but I am afraid that, despite her technical expertise, she is wrong. She claimed that non-taxpayers should never have been allowed to reclaim the tax credit—that was somehow an anomaly. That is nonsense. Unless non-taxpayers can reclaim the credit that is available to taxpayers, they will effectively lose the benefits of their personal tax allowance, an allowance granted to the whole population by Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) mentioned the surprise felt by many of our constituents that the Government have not sorted out the problem. They made a big error in not doing so: they have shown that they are not listening to the real anxieties felt by thousands of pensioners.

The hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty)—in a complacent speech, in which he tried to defend the Government—revealed only that he does not understand the issue, or, more worrying, does not care about it. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) pointed out that Labour Members who tried to defend the Government had not dealt with any of the substantive points in the motion. My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) observed that, in urging pensioners to move their investments, the Government might well, in effect, be urging people to take their investments away from industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) pointed out that, as most non-taxpaying pensioners were not even aware of the issue, the Government's problems were yet to arise.

The Paymaster General made an astonishing defence. She listed a set of economic objectives that she believed would be achieved by taking £25 million away from the poorest pensioners in the country. I cannot believe that she really thinks that. She talked about the poorest pensioners' having an alternative if they transferred their shares to an ISA. Has she seen the briefing by Age Concern to which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton referred? She seems to be saying, from a sedentary position, that she has, but has she read it? It clearly states that the average amount currently reclaimed by non-taxpayers is worth £75. That means that the non-taxpayer involved will have an income from shares of £375. If we use the Treasury's own assumption of a 3 per cent. return on income, that means that the capital will be £12,500, leading to a charge in an ISA that is likely to be about 0.5 per cent., or £62.50 a year.

When that credit falls from 20 per cent. to 10 per cent., as it will in April, the income will be £37.50, which will be more than eaten up by £62.50 worth of charges. On top of that, there is likely to be a 1 per cent. start-up cost in the ISA of £125.

The measure that we seek to have reversed arose from the Government's decision in July 1997 to end repayment of dividend tax credits to pension funds. Either inadvertently or deliberately, the measure was extended to include non-taxpaying individuals from April this year.

During the passage of last year's Finance Bill, we tried to persuade the Government to reverse the measure as it affected individuals. Although we failed in our attempt, we received a sympathetic hearing from the then Paymaster General, who said that he would look again at the issue. Sympathetic noises continued to emanate from the Treasury until 10 December. On that day, the then Financial Secretary sneaked out a written answer that stated that the Government confirmed the decision that was taken in July 1997 to end the repayment of dividend tax credits to non-tax paying individuals.

That decision has disappointed many hon. Members and many thousands of pensioners, including my constituent, Mr. Caffyn. On reading the Government's decision on 10 December, he wrote to me that he "was sadly disappointed." He went on to say:

"It's more upsetting when I know that many of the people who will be affected by this travesty are those who served in the armed services or nursing services during the 39/45 war years."

Age Concern, which has campaigned vigorously on the issue, has rightly pointed out:

"many of those affected are likely to be older pensioners who will not have had the same opportunity to contribute to SERPS or private pensions and are therefore heavily dependent on income from savings and investments."

The majority of hon. Members know that the decision is wrong. Because they know it to be wrong, it is right that we do our duty as Members of Parliament and tell the Government so.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the 28 Labour parliamentarians who signed early-day motion 56 criticising the Government on the subject fail to join us in the Division Lobby tonight, they will be guilty of an abdication of responsibility that should be widely publicised?

Mr. Gibb: It would be sad if a large number of the hon. Members who signed the early-day motion were not to join us in the Division Lobby tonight because it would send a clear signal to the Government, who may change their mind.

Dr. Desmond Turner: It is touching to hear the Opposition's concern for the deprivation of £75 a week from the average pensioner—[HON. MEMBERS: "A year."] Sorry, a year. It is touching also to hear the Opposition's concern for the poorest pensioner. It is not the poorest pensioners who are being deprived, but it was the poorest pensioners who were deprived of £1,000 a year by the previous Government through their decision to break pensions' link to earnings. Has the hon. Gentleman forgotten that?

Mr. Gibb: Will the hon. Gentleman give a commitment that his Government will restore that link? No, he will not. I hope that we will see him in the Division Lobby tonight as I believe that he is one of the signatories of the early-day motion.

Mr. O'Hara: As one of the Members who signed the early-day motion, may I point out again that it did not criticise the Government, but appealed to and encouraged them? I made precisely that point in an intervention. It belies the position of those Members who signed the early-day motion to associate them with the lazily tabled motion on the Order Paper, which uses exactly the same words.

Mr. Gibb: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's career is now safe.

Some Members will have signed early-day motion 56 just to get a quick mention in their newspapers, but have no intention of voting for that motion this evening. However, other Labour Members can be expected to stick to their principles. We look forward to joining them in the Lobby.

If I were a Labour Member, I would vote with even greater conviction for the Opposition motion, as it would not only be the right thing to do but would make practical political sense. In April 2000, the vast majority of the 300,000 pensioners we have been discussing will submit a claim to the Inland Revenue for their annual tax credit refund. However, they will not have read finance legislation, the House's proceedings or the money pages of the press informing them that they can no longer reclaim that money, and they will simply, as usual, submit a claim.

By return of post, those people will receive a letter from the Inland Revenue saying that they cannot have their cheque for £75, £100, £200, or whatever figure they were expecting, because the Government have changed the law. Only months from a general election, the Government will have to contend with 300,000 angry pensioners who have suffered a large personal financial loss directly because of decisions taken by the Chancellor. That cannot be good.

A cynical person might argue that it would be better for the Opposition if the Government did not reverse the decision. However, the Opposition do want the Government to reverse it. We want Ministers to reverse it because of people such as a gentleman from Christchurch, who said:

"The thought of losing the ability to reclaim tax credits has really upset us. Last year, the total reclaim between the two of us amounted to only £118.16, but even that small amount makes a big difference to us."

Opposition Members have received many letters from many people describing the very real hardship that they will suffer if the provision is not reversed. I should like to read a letter from a 67-year-old lady. Labour Members might learn something from her letter, which reads:

"I have a mentally ill son of 44. When I knew how severely ill he was and would never be able to work, I set out to try to put a small nest-egg away for him for his later years, and I stayed at work for an extra five years because of it. As a consequence, he has about £120 a year tax refund which I use to replace things like shoes and clothes."

The Opposition want the Government to reverse the decision because of people like those. However, those cases represent only the tip of the iceberg—an iceberg that will tear into the Government if they fail to reverse the decision.

[Mr. Gibb]

Reversing the decision will cost only £25 million a year, and there should be no technical difficulties in doing so. I therefore urge all hon. Members to vote for what they know to be right—allowing the House to flex its muscle—by voting for the Opposition motion.

9.47 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ms Patricia Hewitt): We have had an interesting and lively debate, although I am sure that hon. Members will forgive me if I cannot deal with every point that has been made.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) made much, at considerable length, of the point that the minimum income guarantee that the Government are introducing for the elderly will not assist those from whom the tax credit will be withdrawn should they not change their investments. I should stress that he was quite wrong on that point. The minimum income guarantee—which will mean an income increase for some of the poorest people in the United Kingdom, of £238 a year for a single pensioner and of £377 a year for a couple—will apply to a large number of non-taxpayers with dividend income.

Under the income support rules, it is perfectly possible to qualify for full income support entitlement with savings of up to £3,000. Depending on the dividend rate, shares of £3,000 would produce a tax credit of about £20, although the tax credit would be below that if the shares were below £3,000.

The average numbers that have been quoted in this debate for tax credits for non-taxpaying pensioners have been thoroughly misleading. Two thirds of non-taxpayers currently receiving a tax credit on their dividend receive less than the average of £75 that has been quoted, half of them receive less than £50 a year in tax credit, and about one third receive less than £20. In other words, they receive less than the tax credit that would be received on a typical shareholding that would still qualify them for full income support if it was their only saving.

The minimum income guarantee that we are putting in place will benefit many of those about whom the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton was concerned, just as the minimum tax guarantee that we are putting in place will remove from tax many of the elderly pensioners who are now paying tax.

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hewitt: No, I am afraid that I shall not. I hope that the House will understand that, as the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) took up a considerable part of my time, I cannot give way. I have dealt with the point that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton made at such length and with such inaccuracy.

My hon. Friends the Members for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) and for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson) urged the Government to reconsider. I understand their concerns and those of other hon. Members. That is why we undertook to look again at the issue and took time to consider it carefully and look at the representations that we had received from many hon. Members. However, the abolition of payable tax credits to UK non-taxpayers is inextricable from the abolition of advance corporation tax.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) criticised the abolition of ACT—a criticism that was answered by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly) in an exceptionally well-informed speech. Our corporation tax reforms, which were announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and are now coming into effect, will remove the distortions of payable tax credits that led to UK-based companies being put under pressure to distribute income in dividends rather than reinvesting the money in the growth of the company. We are removing the distortion of surplus ACT, which was created by the previous Government and has led to UK-based companies paying £7 billion in surplus ACT over the years. It led to the absurdities and complexities of the foreign investment dividend, which was a cack-handed attempt by the previous Administration to deal with the mess created by surplus ACT.

Part of our corporation tax reform package, which has been widely welcomed by business—we heard nothing about that from the Opposition—is a cut in corporation tax to the lowest rate ever in this country and a lower rate than the countries with which we compete.

Mr. Soames: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hewitt: No. I am sorry, but I have already explained—

Mr. Soames *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Lady says that she is not going to give way.

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have explained my reasons. The Government are not going to take lessons from the Opposition in how to run the economy or how to create a tax system that is good for business. We inherited a productivity gap of 40 per cent. with the United States and a personal pensions mis-selling scandal, which my predecessor and I are having to put right. It has cost hundreds of thousands of people who were mis-sold a pension an average of £4,000 in their pension investment. The previous Administration gave this country inflation in double figures, which ate into the savings of elderly people—something about which we heard nothing this evening.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hewitt: No, I will not. I have already said that I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman has wasted quite enough time already.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) rightly pointed out that the Conservative party and the Conservative Government were no friends of the pensioners, and he reminded the House of the package of benefits that the Government have put in place for elderly people, including the cut in VAT on fuel—VAT introduced by the previous Government—coupled with a package of improvements and help with fuel bills worth £108 a year, or £140 a year to the poorest elderly people; the minimum income guarantee, which I have mentioned, and the minimum tax guarantee, on which we will hear more this year; free eye tests; the national

concessionary fares scheme; and the investment in the NHS that will make such a difference to elderly people in particular.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) and the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) asked how they would explain these changes to elderly constituents, and how taxing non-taxpayers would help. Let me make it quite clear—we are not taxing non-taxpayers. We are removing a repayable tax credit that was covered by ACT. The abolition of ACT necessitates the abolition of the repayable tax credit.

Conservative Members ought to be reminded of what the former Chancellor of the Exchequer said in 1993 when he cut repayable tax credits. He said that the payments of lower-rate payers and non-taxpayers

"will be reduced by five percentage points, saving the Exchequer no less than £1 billion a year."—[*Official Report*, 16 March 1993; Vol. 221, c. 186.]

The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) defended that policy in Standing Committee, and said that the then Chancellor

"decided that to collect extra revenue principally from tax-exempt shareholders"—

Mr. Gibb: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hewitt: I am in the middle of a quotation, which I will finish. The right hon. Member for Charnwood said that the then Chancellor

"decided that to collect extra revenue principally from tax-exempt shareholders . . . is to collect revenue from a group of people with taxable capacity, but who are not taxpayers".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 15 June 1993; c. 377.]

I do not recall the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton or any of his right hon. and hon. Friends complaining at the time.

The Government's plans are good news for pensioners, good news for business and good news for the elderly.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is not going to give way.

Ms Hewitt: I am not surprised that Conservative Members do not want to hear the facts—because the facts never help their cause. However, we are helping pensioners and business. We are raising the pension with the minimum income guarantee and cutting corporation tax to its lowest-ever rate. That is why I ask the House to reject the Opposition motion and to support the Government amendment.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 166, Noes 336.

Division No. 35] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Madennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David

Wills, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John M. Taylor and
Mr. Tim Collins.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*

Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Hanson and Mr. Keith Hill.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 332, Noes 155.

Division No. 36] **[10.12 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*

Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Hanson and Mr. Keith Hill.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John M. Taylor and Mr. Tim Collins.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this notes that the fundamental reform of company taxation carried out by the Government has removed major company taxation distortions from the system and put in place a sound base for better

quality investment and growth that will lead to greater prosperity for everyone in the UK, including pensioners; that the Government has taken significant steps to help pensioners, including a guaranteed minimum income for the poorest pensioners through an increase in Income Support from this April worth over £236 extra per year for single pensioners and over £377 extra for couples, a minimum guarantee on tax so that pensioners have no income tax to pay unless their income rises above a certain level, £20 of winter fuel payments for every pensioner household, the introduction of free eye tests for pensioners from this April, new travel concessions on public transport and an extra £21 billion invested in the National Health Service; and further notes that this contrasts sharply with the record of the previous Government which introduced VAT on fuel at 8% and tried to increase it to 17.5%, which introduced charges of eye tests for pensioners, which presided over the mis-selling of pensions which severely damaged the financial security of many pensioners, which ran down the National Health Service on which many pensioners rely, and which was responsible for boom and bust economics which eroded the real value of pensioners' savings through inflation exceeding 10%.

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Ms Jackie Lawrence be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Mr. Chris Ruane be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITION

Wing Bypass

10.24 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am delighted to present a petition on behalf of 1,800 people who reside in the parish of Wing in Buckinghamshire. The petition

Declares that a government inquiry in 1993 concluded that a bypass on the Outer Northern Route was the most suitable solution to the traffic situation in Wing.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to order study work to commence for such a bypass and to inform the Petitioners of when such a bypass will be constructed.

To lie upon the Table.

Telecommunication Installations

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.25 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): This Adjournment debate, for which I am extremely grateful, gives me an opportunity to recognise the efforts of a group of Castle Hill residents in my constituency. For some 30 days, they took part in what is known locally as the seige of Whinney lane, to prevent Orange Communications plc erecting a new telecommunications mast. They were protesting not simply about a mast that spoils their environment, although that is precisely what it does, but about a planning and public health system that had let them down.

Permission for the mast had been gained using permitted development rights. There was no site notice, no public consultation, and not even consultation with locally elected councillors. The first local residents knew that something was about to happen was when a bulldozer ripped out a listed hedgerow and began work on the site. Is that an isolated experience? No, it has been replicated throughout the United Kingdom. At Stormont recently, I shared similar experiences with residents of Northern Ireland.

If hon. Members want to discover the extent of the concern about legislation governing the erection of telecommunications masts, they need look no further than their own experiences in the House. Since 1 May 1997, 88 written questions on the issue have been tabled to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and three Adjournment debates and three early-day motions, which have attracted 91 signatures so far, have focused on the matter. In addition, the DETR has completed one consultation paper, "Telecommunications Development Control", and launched another in conjunction with the Department of Health.

I should make it clear to the Minister that I recognise that the current legislation and, indeed, current policy guidelines, were in place prior to 1997. I am not therefore trying to make any party political point. Nor do I seek to undermine the telecommunications industry, whose technological developments are essential to modern communications.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, whom I alerted to my wish to make the point that permitted development rights have come up in Adjournment debates before, with respect to Railtrack. Perhaps the Government need to take a wider view on whether they should reform the right of private companies to use such wide-ranging rights, certainly given my experience of problems in Radley road in Abingdon and Bagley Wood road in Kennington, where green-belt planning decisions in the latter case and good neighbourliness have been overridden.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his broad consensus on permitted development rights.

It is my belief that planning policy, especially the use of part 24 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, is weighted too much in favour of the industry and not of the environment

[Mr. Willis]

and public health. The proposed guidance announced on 16 November, which extends consultation from 28 to 42 days, is still inadequate. I hope that I can persuade him to think again. It is interesting that his proposal to extend the consultation period has been warmly welcomed by the industry but not by any environmental or public health group.

Although I do not want to be alarmist, I hope that the Minister agrees that neither his Department nor the Department of Health can categorically state that telecommunications masts and mobile phones do not pose a threat to public health.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): I know that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the case in Shepshed in my constituency, where a telecommunications mast is only about 25 m away from the rear of a series of properties. Does he agree that, even if there is no proven case either way, the perception at this stage—fear of the long-term implications and health fears regarding telecommunications masts—needs to be taken into account in legislation?

Mr. Willis: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Quite often, the fear—a fear of something that has not been proven one way or another—causes a great deal of concern and stress.

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I know of a similar instance in my constituency. What concerns me—I wonder whether my hon. Friend shares this concern—is the fact, which has been brought to my attention, that the National Radiological Protection Board is becoming increasingly isolated in its approach to the levels of radiation to which it is prepared to allow the public to be exposed. In some instances, that level is seven times greater than the level suggested by the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection. Does he agree that it is especially worrying that, apparently, the consultants employed by the NRPB are also employed by the telecommunications industry, notably Orange, and that that is a matter of general, desperate, concern on public health grounds?

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for describing me as her hon. Friend; I hope that I am that in this matter, because I believe that the issue unites hon. Members throughout the House. I believe that there is general concern that some of the organisations that we expect to protect us and give us advice are in dispute with one another, and that the industry often uses them to support its case when making planning applications—although I do not believe that the latter is necessarily a bad thing, provided that the rules are clear and above board at the start of the process. I shall return to that subject.

After recent findings on smoking, passive smoking, asbestos and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, any Minister would be foolish to rule out the possibility of a health risk. However, I equally accept that it is almost impossible to prove that telecommunication masts are safe. The Government's task is to assess the degree of risk to the public. The potential risk from telecommunication masts forms the basis of the argument that I shall make tonight for a change in the law.

To date, much research has been conducted on the thermal effects of microwaves as part of the electromagnetic spectrum. There is proof that, at sufficient power and frequency, such waves can cause damage at the tissue, cell and molecular levels. However, although evidence exists to suggest that the public are relatively safe from the thermal effects of electromagnetic waves in the radio frequency used by mobile phone operators, there is insufficient evidence to calculate the level of risk from biological effects.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Willis: I will, for the last time.

Mr. Stunell: I thank my hon. Friend, and I am sorry to trespass on his time; I shall do so only briefly. I draw his attention to the situation in my constituency where, overnight, a mast was erected in a back yard overlooking 25 terraced houses. The transmitting antennae are less than 50 ft from the nearest bedroom window. The mast is an eyesore and—more to the point—it raises serious health concerns. I very strongly support the plea that he brings to the House tonight.

Mr. Willis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There is general guidance that, in the United Kingdom, masts should be sited 150 m from residential properties, but that guidance is being openly flouted in the desire to put up masts and fight off the competition. It is a real issue, which I believe the Government must address.

I was speaking about the biological effects of microwaves, especially radio frequency waves at the very low frequencies used in mobile phones and transmissions from mobile telecommunications masts. Increasing evidence suggests that low-frequency magnetic fields and low-frequency microwave radiation arise from the constantly pulsating signal of mobile phone masts, and that their proximity to electromagnetic fields encountered naturally causes potential biological damage. So concerned are countries worldwide—including the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden and, of course, the European Union—that the World Health Organisation has set up an in-depth study into the biological effects of low-frequency microwaves. I am pleased that the UK Government have supported the research enthusiastically and are among its leading supporters across the world. So far, research using animals to assess the biological effects has demonstrated cell stress, enzyme activity, genetic effects, gene transcription and hormone production. The biological changes seen in cells, tissues and organisms are similar to changes seen in degenerative diseases such as cancer, leukaemia, Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease.

Dr. Michael Repacholi of the World Health Organisation, a leading expert in the field, and Dr. Russell of the US Food and Drugs Administration, said at a conference in Dublin on 6 March 1998 that until the current WHO research is complete, "the jury is out" on the health risks from low-level electromagnetic fields.

Henry Lai, the research professor in bioengineering at the university of Washington, another leading research

figure, stated in a recent letter to Halsey Meyer Higgins, a major London law firm currently involved in litigation over the health issue:

"People who live close to masts are constantly being exposed to the radiation for months or years. Even though the level is low it would matter if the effects of RFR turn out to be cumulative. Small doses cumulate over a long period of time and will eventually lead to harmful effects."

That is the view of the world's leading expert.

In a press release issued by the WHO in December 1997, in which it announced the research project into EMF exposure, Dr. Paul Kleihues, director of WHO's international agency for research on cancer, stated:

"With an estimated 15 million new cancer cases each year by the year 2020, we must know if exposure to EMF is contributing to any significant extent to the incidence of the disease".

If the World Health Organisation can take seriously the possible effects of mobile telephone masts, so should Parliament.

In the United States, 39 states have stopped erecting masts until the authorities have greater confidence in the technology. In Australia, the siting of cell tower masts less than 500 m from schools, homes and hospitals has been banned. A draft European Union recommendation on limitation of public exposure to electromagnetic fields is under consideration.

I am not suggesting that the Government should order every mobile telephone mast to be pulled down tomorrow, or that the telecommunications industry should stop applying to erect new masts. What I am suggesting, and what the WHO is suggesting, is a cautionary approach. That would be in line with our obligations under the Maastricht treaty, which introduced the precautionary principle as a legal obligation in article 130-r(2) of the treaty of Rome. The fact that since the UK signed the Maastricht treaty PPG8 has not been amended could well give rise to a challenge in the European courts.

What can be done to support the precautionary principle? I ask the Minister to consider five proposals. First, PPG8 should be amended to restore the balance against the industry and in favour of the general public. According to section (5) of PPG8:

"The Government's General Policy on telecommunications is to facilitate the growth of new and existing systems."

That advice is probably the most heavily weighted Government guidance to local planning authorities. That probably explains why, even when planning authorities refuse applications, 47 per cent. of them are granted at appeal by the Secretary of State, compared with only 33 per cent. of all other planning applications.

It is no use the Minister saying that planning authorities have the opportunity to exercise control over the individual siting of mast developments. They do not. Given the public concerns about health and the environment, such policy objective imbalance is surely unacceptable.

The second proposal is to remove permitted development rights for all applications for new masts. Already one company, One2One, has agreed to give up its permitted development rights. If that company can do so and continue to compete in the market, surely others can, too. Such a measure would immediately restore public confidence in the justice of the planning system. It would enable local residents and elected members adequately to consider the merits of each application, give operators greater incentive to negotiate with local communities and the planning authority, and still allow operators a right of appeal to the Secretary of State.

My third proposal would make mandatory the requirement for local planning authorities to have as part of their development plan a detailed telecommunications planning policy. Currently, PPG8 recommends such inclusions without making them obligatory. Local authorities should be obliged to maintain on the plan details of all current installations, including their power, frequency and coverage. That would give added protection against the cumulative effects of multi-installations using a single mast and pave the way for assessing need.

My fourth proposal would be an essential part of the development control process. All applications should be subject to an independent assessment of need before determination. At present, the operator can justify need without any external verification. Few, if any, local authorities carry specialists who are able to assess a case of need. Why can Cellnet achieve 99 per cent. coverage across the United Kingdom using 2,400 masts, while one of its competitors needs more than 4,000? An independent assessment financed by the operator as part and parcel of the planning application would show the public that need had been independently assessed.

My fifth proposal is the most crucial. Each application should be accompanied by a health risk assessment financed by the applicant and produced by the National Radiological Protection Board. The hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) may disagree with that, but it is one of the only organisations that could give a local authority an independent health risk assessment.

The NRPB's role is to assess risk. Although it is reassessing its guidance in the light of public concern, I believe that an assessment by it would give added security to local communities.

The debate has given me an opportunity to present the concerns of my constituents in Harrogate and Knaresborough. My proposals mirror their concerns and those of hon. Members who have had the courtesy to stay in the Chamber to listen to the debate. These proposals are not against the telecommunications industry, but they represent a cautionary approach to future development.

At present, the jury is out on the health risks. How much better to say in five years that we were right to be cautious than to have another BSE-type problem heaped upon us.

10.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) on securing this Adjournment debate and giving the House an opportunity to discuss an important matter that causes concern to many people. They feel quite reasonable anxiety about the environmental and the health impact of telecommunication masts erected in their vicinity.

The growth in the mobile communications sector over the past 15 years has been remarkable. There are more than 13 million mobile phone subscribers in the United Kingdom; in other words, more than one in five of the population has a mobile phone. Some analysts expect that figure to rise to about 30 million subscribers—one in two of the population—by 2003.

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

An efficient and modern telecommunications network offers a number of significant social and economic benefits, helping to create a climate conducive to business development and providing ready access to a growing range of services in urban and rural areas.

The technical constraints of cellular radio networks—the need to have a line of sight between handsets and base stations, for example—means that providing the necessary infrastructure represents a considerable challenge. In meeting that challenge, it is important that we continue to strive to minimise the environmental impact of the new installations.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I do not have time to give way, as unfortunately, I have been given only 12 minutes to reply. I must press ahead if I am to do justice to the comments of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough.

The Government's policy for telecommunications development is to strike a balance between the provision of a competitive national telecommunications network and the protection of our environment. That is reflected in the planning policy guidance on telecommunication development set out in planning policy guidance note 8. We are fully committed to our environmental objectives and established national policies for the protection of the countryside and residential areas.

It may be helpful if I explain the background to the licensing of radio-based telecommunications operators. The network operators are licensed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under section 7 of the Telecommunications Act 1984 to provide mobile radio telecommunication services. In order to help them to do that, they are granted telecommunications code powers.

As licensed code system operators, cellular operators are given permitted development rights under part 24 of the Town and Country Planning (General) Permitted Development Order 1995. Under the GPDO, operators have the right to carry out certain types of development without the need to apply to the local planning authority for planning permission. Some development permitted in this way, such as the erection of a mast up to 15 m in height, is, however, subject to a condition that requires the operator to satisfy a prior approval procedure. Under that procedure, the local planning authority has the opportunity to say whether it wishes to approve, within 28 days, details of the installation's siting and appearance. The authority is able to refuse approval if it considers that the development will pose a serious threat to amenity.

It is important that operators recognise that the selection of sites for the erection of masts may raise a number of sensitive issues. That is particularly true of residential areas. Appendix E to environment circular 9/95, in suggesting the sort of considerations that might need to be taken into account in addressing a mast's siting under the GPDO provisions, refers to the site in relation to residential property. Further guidance on this aspect is included in the code of best practice on telecommunications prior approval procedures as applied to mast or tower development, which is published by our Department. Copies of that document are available in the Library.

I commend the code, which was prepared by a joint working party of local authority representatives and the principal telecommunications code system operators, as a basis for best practice. It provides guidance on how local planning authorities and operators can co-operate to make it easier for prior approval applications to be dealt with effectively within the time allowed under the GPDO.

As well as providing guidance on the operator's practice, the code examines the local planning authority's role. It is important that local authorities understand the constraints within which telecom companies operate, and assist them in finding pragmatic solutions. The planning authorities' local knowledge is vital in that process. The control of development, such as telecommunication masts, does not rely simply on responding to planning applications. PPG8 sets out a number of positive steps that local planning authorities can take to help shape telecommunications development in their area. As to the hon. Gentleman's third proposal, we expect local authorities to include clear policies on telecommunications in their development plans, which are adopted after opportunities for public involvement in their preparation.

The guidance also makes clear the importance we attach to close consultation between operators and local planning authorities before making any application for consent to install telecommunications apparatus. Pre-application discussion will assist both sides in understanding the constraints within which the other is working, and exploring possible alternatives for mast siting and design. Although not a statutory requirement, the Department encourages publicity for prior approval applications so that people likely to be affected by the proposed development can make their views known to the authority. Many of these working practices are set down in the code of best practice.

We want to avoid the situation highlighted by the hon. Gentleman—it occurred in his constituency—in which local residents are unaware of a proposed mast installation until work commences. For that reason, we made proposals in our consultation paper "Telecommunications Development Control", which was published for public comment in July. In that paper, we said that we considered that the use of permitted development rights continued to be appropriate, but that there was scope for improving procedures to address a number of concerns. A major concern was the need to allow for greater public consultation over the siting and design of masts erected under the GPDO. A wide range of respondents to the consultation paper were highly supportive of the principle of increasing the opportunity for public comment.

In November, the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning announced his intention to extend the prior approval notice period to 42 days for ground-based masts. That announcement was intended to ensure that local authorities would have sufficient time to consult local communities on the siting and appearance of proposed mast installations at the outset.

We intend to place a statutory obligation on the operators to erect a site notice to publicise the development proposed. That will advise local people of the proposed development, and enable them to make their views known to the local authority. The authority will be able to take any representations into account when considering whether to grant or refuse approval to the mast's siting and appearance.

There will continue to be a need for local authorities to establish the necessary avenues for consultation with local Members and residents ahead of a GPDO application. The guidance that we are drawing up will cover the local authority's role in bringing the application to the attention of interested parties, and undertaking any additional publicity that might be required to achieve that. We believe that the new procedures will overcome the problems described by the hon. Gentleman, and I hope that they will prevent any further sieges of Whinney lane or anywhere else.

Concern has been expressed about the number of telecommunications masts. It is important not to ignore the technical constraints of rolling out telecommunications networks; that said, we are anxious to keep the numbers of masts to a minimum, consistent with an efficient network. This is why we encourage mast sharing.

It is for that reason that the licences issued to telecommunications operators require them, before erecting a new mast, to take all reasonable steps to investigate using, or replacing for joint use, an existing mast or other structure, whether their own or belonging to another operator. I understand that 60 per cent. of the mobile operators' antennae are now on buildings, other structures or shared masts.

While recognising that mast or site sharing may not be the answer in every case—the installation of new and innovative masts and antennae, designed and sited to blend into the environment, might on occasion be a more attractive option—the Government attach great importance to minimising the impact of telecommunications development on the environment. We are keen to discuss with the telecommunications industry what more can be done on all sides to reduce the adverse environmental impact of new development, by furthering our policy on mast sharing and in other ways. To that end, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning will meet representatives of the industry early next month. I hope that, following all that I have said, the hon. Gentleman will realise that the Government take the matter very seriously, and are taking steps to address the problem that he has raised.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's worries about the alleged adverse health effects in connection with telecommunications installations. We are aware of public concern about the suggestion that there can be harmful effects from exposure to electromagnetic fields, including those associated with mobile communications base stations, and the Government take that concern seriously. The National Radiological Protection Board issues guidelines for restricting human exposure to electromagnetic fields. The guidelines are based on well-established thermal effects, and their basis is broadly consistent with other international guidelines such as those of the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection.

The NRPB guidelines can be exceeded in areas close to and directly in front of the antenna, but I should emphasise that that is within ½ to 2 m, and that the public are prevented from access to such areas. The practical effect of health and safety at work legislation, under which operators have a duty to ensure that their work activities do not present a risk to employees and the general public, will be to prevent public access to areas where the NRPB guideline levels are exceeded. Exposure at ground levels, and in areas to which the public have access, are many times below recommended exposure levels—typically, some thousands of times inside the exposure limit.

The House may be aware that on 8 December, my Department issued a joint circular with the Department of Health on a consultation exercise on land use planning and electromagnetic fields, which deals specifically with those considerations in the land use planning context. A copy of the consultation package has been placed in the Library. The closing date for responses is 19 February. Hon. Members, and members of the public with an interest in the subject, are encouraged to forward their views to my Department in the context of the public consultation.

I believe that the Government are acting appropriately to respond to the anxieties that have been expressed. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the total absence of Conservative Members this evening suggests that concern is limited to the two parties that are represented, but I stress that the Government are concerned, and are taking steps to deal with the problems that have been identified. We shall continue to pursue the research in respect of health risks that the hon. Gentleman has anticipated. I hope that he will accept that the real concerns that he has voiced have been accepted by the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 19 January 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

St. Helena

1. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): If he will restore full British citizenship to residents of the island of St. Helena. [64585]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): The issue of British citizenship for all residents of United Kingdom overseas territories who do not already have it is being considered as part of our review of policy towards the overseas territories. The issue will be covered in the overseas territories White Paper, which we expect to publish soon.

Mr. Russell: I am sure that we all welcome the early publication of the White Paper, but can the Minister give any reason why the 5,500 citizens of St. Helena should not have restored to them the full British citizenship that the islanders enjoyed for more than 300 years, before the Conservative Government withdrew it in 1981? Surely the islanders deserve an early return to full British citizenship.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Lloyd: I am very pleased to hear members of the official Opposition cheering on the hon. Gentleman. When all is said and done, it was they who took away that right from the St. Helenians, and he is absolutely right about that. I think that he would be happy to acknowledge that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made it very clear for a long time that the issue of citizenship will be treated constructively and sympathetically, but I must tell the House, and those outside who show a keen interest in the matter, that it is still, I am afraid, necessary to wait for the White Paper, which will be published soon.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): While the Minister is considering citizenship for the St. Helenians, will he also recognise that they have grave concerns about their transport links? Is he aware that, in order to attend a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference—which hon. Members of all parties attended, including me—a delegate from the St. Helena Parliament had to travel for three and a half weeks by ship to Cardiff? Even more urgently than citizenship, the people of St. Helena need an airstrip.

Mr. Lloyd: It may be that, in this case, the people of St. Helena speak for themselves better than the hon. Gentleman speaks for them; when they meet me and other Members of Parliament, they may say that transportation is important, but citizenship is always the issue that they raise first. A review of transportation links is taking place. All that I can say to the hon. Gentleman, and through him to the House and the world, is that the most important thing is to ensure that there is adequate communication. The existing ship that sails regularly to St. Helena must be a long-term part of the island's transportation structure, and we want to do nothing to threaten the viability of that sea route.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): Is my hon. Friend alluding to the charge that many of us made against the then Government, that in 1981 the citizens of St. Helena and other dependent territories were treated cynically as pawns, to ensure that that Government did not face continuing embarrassment over large influxes into the United Kingdom of residents of Hong Kong when Britain was negotiating the handover of that territory?

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend castigates the official Opposition in their former role as the Government better than I can, but I can assure him that their days in government are now receding rapidly into the past and that it will be a long time before the British people give that failed party any credence and trust them again with the onerous burden of government.

Kosovo

2. **Mr. Martin Bell** (Tatton): What assessment he has made of the prospects for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe verification mission in Kosovo. [64586]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The courage and commitment of the Kosovo verification mission have brought stability to the lives of many in Kosovo by brokering local ceasefires and assisting in the return of refugees. It was months before the world knew the full truth about the massacre in Srebrenica. Thanks to the Kosovo verification mission, we had clear, accurate and reliable information within 24 hours of the atrocity at Racak, and as a result we were able to secure immediate universal condemnation of the massacre.

We deplore Belgrade's decision to designate as persona non grata the head of the Kosovo verification mission, Bill Walker. I have today spoken with both Madeleine Albright and Knut Vollebaek, the current president-in-office of the OSCE. We are all agreed that Bill Walker will stay at his post and continue the work that he is doing with distinction. It is not for President Milosevic to decide who will head the international team.

Mr. Bell: In planning the way forward, is the Foreign Secretary aware of one of the lessons of the Bosnia

experience, that persuasion by itself achieves little and that the threat of force, to be effective, must be matched by a willingness to use it?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As I said to the House yesterday, the NATO planes remain on 96-hour notice and the actord—activation order—remains in force and requires only one political decision to trigger it. We showed last time that we had a credible threat of military force, or we would not have secured the agreement. We are now determined that President Milosevic will honour the agreements that he made.

Mr. Lawrence Cunliffe (Leigh): Is it not clear that President Milosevic has broken every undertaking and assurance given to the International War Crimes Tribunal? Is it not evident that he has no intention of co-operating? What positive action can be taken to punish his flagrant violations?

Mr. Cook: General Clark and General Naumann, the two top North Atlantic Treaty Organisation generals, are currently in Belgrade for discussions with President Milosevic. They will report tomorrow to the North Atlantic Council, which will consider appropriate steps in the light of any assurances that President Milosevic gives. I echo my hon. Friend's reference to the International War Crimes Tribunal: it is vital that it is given access to Kosovo so that it may carry out an independent investigation of what was plainly an atrocious war crime.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): It is clear, is it not, that, but for the presence of the official monitors, the sort of events that occurred last weekend in Kosovo might have been repeated elsewhere on many occasions? When General Wesley Clark talks to Mr. Milosevic today, does he do so with the full political and military authority of NATO? In particular, can the Foreign Secretary assure us that military planning for every eventuality is occurring, covering all options including deployment of troops on the ground?

Mr. Cook: I can assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that General Clark has the full authority of NATO; he is, after all, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, and he went at the request of the North Atlantic Council following its meeting on Sunday. General Clark's mission carries the full authority of NATO.

Preparations continue, and they have not ceased, on what might be the appropriate military response if one is required. However, there would be grave reservations about committing ground troops in the absence of a clear agreement between the two participants in the conflict on a political outcome and a political track. To put in ground troops without a commitment on both sides of the political process would be to put in ground troops without a clear political objective.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): A uniformed police force in Europe is murdering its own citizens in cold blood with the full support of its Government. Like the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), I had hoped to have seen the last of that sort of thing in Bosnia, and that lessons had been learnt from that conflict. As President Milosevic has comprehensively reneged on the agreement that he made with Richard Holbrooke, can we rely on NATO to take whatever steps may be necessary to degrade or restrain the forces that are perpetrating atrocities?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend can certainly have an assurance that NATO remains fully engaged, fully prepared and fully ready to take whatever action is judged to be necessary. I must remind him that, as has been said already, the presence of the verification mission in Kosovo has prevented such atrocities from occurring much more often than they have. Were we to contemplate going down the road towards military action, the first thing that we would have to consider would be the withdrawal of that verification mission.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Has not the situation in Kosovo deteriorated, even since the Foreign Secretary's statement at the Dispatch Box yesterday? The Prime Minister's official spokesman was quoted yesterday as saying that there was little scope for early military action. How can that be reconciled with the statement of a State Department spokesman that NATO would very quickly have to make a decision to use force? How can it be reconciled with the repeated threats of force made by the Foreign Secretary? Does the presence of the verification mission not imply that action will be taken if the mission is not allowed to do its job? What action will be taken if President Milosevic refuses to submit to the demands made by the Foreign Secretary yesterday, and repeated today?

Mr. Cook: First, I assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that I met my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister yesterday and discussed with him with great gravity the options available to us. As I said yesterday, NATO has sent its two top generals to Belgrade to repeat to President Milosevic our demands for full compliance. President Milosevic knows full well what NATO had prepared last time round in October when military action was prepared. The actord that authorised the commanders to carry out that action remains in force. It requires only one decision of the North Atlantic Council to start the process, and the council will meet tomorrow to hear the report of the two generals.

EU Enlargement

4. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): When he last met his colleagues from other member states of the European Union to discuss matters relating to enlargement. [64588]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Ms Joyce Quin): Enlargement is a regular theme during my meetings with colleagues from other European Union member states. EU Foreign Ministers discussed enlargement issues at each of the General Affairs Councils during the Austrian presidency in 1998.

Dr. Godman: In view of the shenanigans in Strasbourg last week, the failure of the Commission to deal with fraud and the need to reform the common agricultural policy comprehensively, should not Ministers of member states agree to offer an honest and realistic assessment of the timetable for accession? Do not applicant states

deserve that honesty? Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity of the special European Council in March to persuade her colleagues to be as honest as possible, because there is no chance of those countries coming into the EU within the next 10 years?

Ms Quin: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that we have to be honest in our dealings with the applicant countries. I also believe that we must respect the timetables that the European Union has set itself for the reforms that it needs to conclude by March and the March deadline set by the European Parliament for action on fraud by the Commission.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the right hon. Lady recall the first sentence of the communiqué agreed at the Vienna summit:

"European integration has gained new momentum"?

In the light of that first sentence, does she think that her right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has cause to regret his claim that the Maastricht treaty represented a "high watermark of integration"? Will she confirm that we will now be faced with ever-increasing demands for greater European integration, which everyone who believes in national self-government should continually resist?

Ms Quin: When the hon. Gentleman asks questions in the House, he always seems keen to overlook the fact that the Maastricht treaty was concluded under the stewardship of a Conservative Government, as was the single market, which represented a big step forward. If he is against the single market, he will find few allies in the House. The Vienna conclusions to which he referred are worth while and show the areas of agreement between European countries, which are very much in the interests of the citizens of this country and of citizens throughout the EU.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): What progress has been made in discussions between the Government of Turkey and the European Commission on drawing up an understanding of what Turkey needs to do to fulfil conditions for an approach to membership of the EU?

Ms Quin: It is clear that Turkey would need to meet the criteria that all other countries need to meet if they are to become part of the European Union. Those include important economic criteria and important political criteria relating to democracy and human rights.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister accept that, after enlargement, countries that come into the EU will take a substantial share of its structural funds? In those circumstances, does that not put additional pressure on us in the period up to 2006 to maximise the benefit that comes to the countries of the United Kingdom from those funds? Can she assure us that the Government are turning every stone to achieve that?

Ms Quin: Indeed; I believe that the Government have already negotiated with a good degree of success on the retention of structural funds, in particular the use of objective 1 funds, which are likely to go to additional areas in the UK. That is important. Also, we have to prepare adequately for enlargement and to recognise the financial responsibilities that all EU countries have to make that enlargement process a success. The long-term economic benefits of enlargement will be considerable.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will the Minister's Department audit ministerial visits to the principal applicant countries of the European Union, as compared with those of Ministers from our EU counterparts? Does she realise that the United Kingdom, both under this Government and the previous Administration, is insufficiently engaged in terms of ministerial visits to applicant countries in central Europe? The United Kingdom does not compare favourably when one considers the visits made by German Chancellors or French Prime Ministers and Presidents. I hope that that will change.

Ms Quin: I do not accept that there are insufficient ministerial contacts. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has visited several applicant countries in recent months. I assure my hon. Friend that we wish to ensure the best possible co-ordination of ministerial visits. *[Interruption.]* I am trying to give the House some information, which is difficult because it is, unfortunately, wasted on Conservative Members. Through the co-ordination committee that I chair, we seek to co-ordinate ministerial visits to make maximum use of our contacts, not only with existing European Union countries but, very importantly, with the applicant countries.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Can the right hon. Lady clarify whether candidate countries are to be required to join the economic and monetary union? Would that not erect further hurdles in their path? Can she confirm—I understand that she was at the relevant meeting—that the Foreign Secretary recently described the Government's approach to the euro as unsustainable?

Ms Quin: The right hon. and learned Gentleman's last point is not correct. On his earlier point, the candidate countries express great interest in belonging to the euro zone, but the conditions for them will be negotiated during the current accession negotiations. We are keen to ensure that their conclusion represents a good balance between the European Union's interests and those of the applicant countries.

Middle East Peace Process

5. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): If he will make a statement on the middle east peace process following the Wye agreement. [64589]

9. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): If he will make a statement on action by the British Government to support the middle east peace process. [64593]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We believe that the Wye agreement offers the best way forward in the middle east peace process. We are deeply concerned by the decision of the Government of Israel to freeze progress on its implementation. Both sides should abide by the commitments that they entered into at Wye and refrain from unilateral acts that undermine it. Both the

Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority would benefit from progress on the peace. Both should now demonstrate an equal commitment to it.

Dr. Iddon: Assuming that the Palestinians declare statehood on the intended date, what will the Government's reaction be?

Mr. Cook: I have just told the House that we would call on both sides to refrain from unilateral acts that would undermine the peace process. I fully understand the frustration in the Palestinian Authority about the fact that 4 May is the terminal date of the Oslo process. It was anticipated that the final stages would have been resolved by then. It remains the view of Britain that all options should be available through self-government decisions by the Palestinian people, not excluding the option of an independent state. However, we would hope that such progress could be achieved through the peace process and not by unilateral action.

Dr. Starkey: Since the Wye agreement was signed at the end of October, 251 Palestinian political prisoners have been detained by the Israeli Government. The Israelis have confiscated a further 3,000 acres of Palestinian land and accelerated the building of Jewish housing on it. What action are the British Government taking to represent to the Israelis that those activities must cease and that their unilateral suspension of the Wye agreement until after the Israeli general election in May is incredibly unhelpful, and not what one would expect of a state that has signed a binding agreement?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, if the Israeli Government wish to make progress with the peace process, they must carry out the implementation of the peace agreement that they agreed at the Wye Plantation talks.

With reference to settlements, my hon. Friend helpfully highlights the other side of unilateral acts—in this case, by the Government of Israel. I repeat our appeal to both sides to cease unilateral actions so that we can make progress via the negotiating table.

To answer my hon. Friend's question about what the Government are doing, I can tell her that, with our European colleagues, we prepare quarterly reports on settlement activity. Those reports are widely available and should inform public debate. We repeat our appeal to the Government of Israel to desist from those unilateral steps that make it so much more difficult to take forward a negotiated agreement.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Given the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to an ethical foreign policy, does he agree that, in the light of Israeli obduracy, a continuing and monstrous injustice is being done to the Palestinians? Accordingly, does he not consider that it is about time we decoupled ourselves from the pointless, fatuous and ineffective middle east policy of the United States of America, to whose coat tails we continue to hang in that department; and that we should try to create a sensible, pragmatic, European policy that we can follow with pride and good sense?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman addresses the House with his characteristic robustness and trenchancy. Of course, we shall continue to explore, with our European colleagues, what helpful initiatives can be taken by Europe.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Do not bother.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman tells me not to bother, but Europe is underpinning the peace process with funding. If it was not for Europe putting that money behind the peace process, the process would have crumbled long ago. It little befits him to say that we should not bother to keep the peace process in being.

On the efforts of the United States, the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) should remember that the United States brokered the Wye Plantation agreement. That agreement provided a way forward, and Europe and America will now maintain pressure on both parties to ensure that they make progress in implementing that agreement.

Kashmir

6. **Mr. John Heppell** (Nottingham, East): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of India on the future of Kashmir. [6590]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): We regularly discuss Kashmir with representatives of India and Pakistan.

Mr. Heppell: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will have welcomed the talks that took place at the end of last year between the Pakistan and Indian Governments and the confidence-building measures that resulted. Will he assure me that the British Government will be prepared to accept a solution in Jammu and Kashmir only if it has actually been put to the people of Jammu and Kashmir?

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend is right to say that we welcomed the talks that took place last year, and we look forward to the next round of talks in February. We hope that those talks will deal with the crucial issues between India and Pakistan and there is no more important issue between those two countries than the future of Kashmir. I agree with my hon. Friend that any future agreement reached between India and Pakistan will stand only if it has popular support.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that problems over Kashmir have arisen only because Britain pulled out of India six months earlier than agreed, under a previous Labour Administration. Does he agree that we therefore have an important responsibility in respect of the future of Kashmir, because the people of Kashmir have always been denied an opportunity to decide their own destiny? The right hon. Gentleman is aware of the existence of the Simla agreement and, when he last answered questions in the House on Kashmir, he said that Pakistan would be happy for Britain to take part—perhaps as chairman—in discussions under the provisions of the Simla agreement. However, we still await a view from India on the matter. Has the right hon. Gentleman raised the subject in his discussions with the Indians, and is there any hope that

Britain could act as an independent chairman to bring the two sides closer together and to get agreement over Kashmir, as provided under the Simla agreement?

Mr. Fatchett: Both the Indian and Pakistan Governments feel that the best way to make immediate progress on all their bilateral relations is for them to engage in talks. If, at any stage, the two countries told the United Kingdom that we could play a responsible and constructive role, we should be happy to do so. Both Governments know that.

Entry Clearance Interviews

7. **Mr. Neil Gerrard** (Walthamstow): When he plans to introduce tape recording of interviews by entry clearance offices at overseas posts. [64591]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): In accordance with the recommendation of the recent Foreign Affairs Committee's fourth report on entry clearance operations, the Department is planning a pilot project. Preparations are under way for the pilot system to be installed as soon as practicable in the financial year 1999–2000.

Mr. Gerrard: I welcome that news, as some hon. Members have pressed for such a project for a long time. Can the Minister confirm that the pilot will cover the full range of interviews, including interviews for settlement and visits? Will he confirm also that the pilot's time scale will be as short as possible so that we can evaluate the findings and look at extending it to other posts? Can the Minister give us any idea of which posts will be considered for pilot projects? Will he take into consideration the number of problems and complaints that have been brought to the attention of his Department by hon. Members whose constituents have experienced difficulties in particular posts?

Mr. Fatchett: We have not yet decided on a post, but I welcome my hon. Friend's broad comments. We aim to keep the pilot as short as possible, but we must have an opportunity to make an effective evaluation of the way in which the pilot system works. When it comes to that assessment, we must be open to any possibilities that may flow from the pilot system. I assure my hon. Friend and any other hon. Members who have an interest in these matters that we will be open with them and will look to engage them in discussion about possible developments.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): The Minister may know that I founded the Immigration Advisory Service, which plays a large part in such matters. I welcome the Minister's comments today. He knows that we introduced tape-recorded interviews into our criminal justice system to ensure fairness and protection for the defendant. Many Conservative Members believe that fairness and protection for those seeking entry to this country would also be greatly enhanced by the rapid introduction of tape-recorded interviews. I hope that they will be introduced very widely very soon.

Mr. Fatchett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and for his work with the Immigration Advisory Service. We must learn from the pilot before we move towards using extensive tape recording as a means of reaching decisions. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that that may be an effective means of ensuring fairness.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I welcome the Minister's decision to start the pilot project and suggest that he chooses the Bombay post as the subject of the study. Does the Minister agree that, even with recorded interviews, unless we examine the way in which the migration and visa correspondence unit operates when taking statements, there is a risk that, because of MVCU inefficiency, those statements will never reach the applicants in this country?

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend raised several concerns about the migration and visa correspondence unit in an Adjournment debate last week. I said at the time that we would examine those points and do all that we could to improve the unit's efficiency. My hon. Friend kindly made some complimentary comments about the work of the entry clearance staff, the burdens that they carry and the way in which they discharge them. I hear what my hon. Friend has said about Bombay and I understand his reasons for suggesting that post. However, we shall also consider other posts before taking a decision.

Iraq

8. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): What assessment he has made of Iraq's compliance with United Nations resolutions. [64592]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I regret to say that Iraq persists in failing to comply with many of the requirements of Security Council resolutions. It has failed to disarm its weapons of mass destruction and it continues with gross violations of human rights, including torture, extra-judicial killing and suppression of ethnic minorities. It has also failed to release or to provide any account of the fate of the 600 detainees removed from Kuwait.

The recent threat by the Iraqi Assembly to withdraw recognition of the Kuwaiti border is the latest example of Iraq's wilful failure to accept its obligations to either its neighbours or the international community.

Mr. Winterton: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that full and rational reply. He clearly agrees that Saddam Hussein is flagrantly ignoring his international obligations under United Nations resolutions. Does he agree also that many Arab nations are urging Saddam Hussein to work closely with the United Nations and to obey the United Nations resolutions? Even the distinguished leader of Egypt, President Mubarak, blames Saddam Hussein for the suffering of the Iraqi people.

What further steps can be taken to bring Saddam Hussein to account for the danger that he poses to the world?

On a more minor matter, is not Saddam Hussein continuing frequently to violate the no-fly zone, hampering the west in what it is seeking to do?

Mr. Cook: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, Saddam Hussein has on one occasion attempted to fly planes in

the no-fly zone, which produced an immediate response from us. He has repeatedly threatened the allied aircraft that are enforcing the no-fly zone. We shall continue to enforce that zone and to take necessary measures in self-defence. The House should remember that the no-fly zone is not in any way a threat to the Iraqi people; it is there to defend them against being bombed by Saddam Hussein.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in what he says about the Arab nations. Saddam Hussein's recent speech in which he characterised all other Arab Governments as dwarves and cowards has done much to restore solidarity among Arab nations. They know perfectly well that they are the ones against whom the weapons of mass destruction will be targeted.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Is my right hon. Friend aware that I visited northern Iraq—Kurdistan—just before Christmas? I was deeply moved by the Kurds' view that Saddam Hussein, in violating United Nations Security Council resolutions 986 and 688, was mainly responsible for the suffering in Iraq. Will my right hon. Friend therefore assure me and the Kurds that the Government will take every step, particularly in the United Nations, to ensure that Saddam is not given opportunities to punish his own people further?

Mr. Cook: I can assure my right hon. Friend that I was aware of his visit to northern Iraq because it was brought to my attention at the very interesting time at which he was in the Kurdish area. I assure him and the people of that area that Britain will remain committed to making sure that Saddam cannot infringe the no-fly zone. We recognise that Saddam is sustained in power not by public opinion but by the savage, brutal repression of all those who would otherwise challenge him.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): With Saddam clearly not back in his cage, as the Secretary of State promised, the need for a new approach to the Iraqi regime is now very urgent. The French and the Russians are calling for a relaxation of sanctions, which is alarming the people in northern Iraq, who fear that they may lose the oil revenues that they receive for humanitarian purposes directly from the UN escrow account and be forced, once again, to rely directly on Saddam and Baghdad.

Will the Secretary of State assure us that on this occasion the new approach will be properly thought through and that he will ensure not only that Saddam's capacity to produce weapons is monitored, but that any new approach will give full weight to making sure that food and medical supplies reach the children and people of Iraq who are suffering at the hands of Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Cook: I can repeat to the hon. Lady and the House the assurances that I have given several times—there are no sanctions against imports of food and medicines by Saddam Hussein and, in a period when he persists in saying that his people go hungry, his harvest in Iraq has increased by 15 per cent. We are certainly exploring how we can build a diplomatic consensus to isolate Saddam Hussein and we are in dialogue with France and Russia on those points.

I am unclear as to whether the hon. Lady was seeking the relaxation of sanctions, but if Saddam Hussein wants sanctions to be relaxed, he should comply with the Security Council resolutions and abandon his expensive programme of developing weapons of mass destruction.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Will the Foreign Secretary explain why the Government treat Iraq and Israel differently when they are both in breach of UN resolutions? Does he accept that the weapons of mass destruction in the hands of both those countries are outlawed by the United Nations? We know the Government's position on Iraq; will he now explain their position on Israel?

Mr. Cook: I have already this afternoon explained our position in relation to the Government of Israel and made it perfectly plain that we greatly regret their unilateral actions which undermine the peace process. If my hon. Friend is attempting to put both Governments in the same box, he should reflect on the fact that Saddam Hussein is the leader of a country in which he has himself used chemical and biological weapons. He used them extensively against his neighbour in the Iran-Iraq war and used them mercilessly against his own people in the Kurdish area where he killed 5,000 villagers when he attacked Halabja. We cannot walk away and leave a man with such a track record in possession of those weapons.

Diplomats (Ethical Foreign Policy)

10. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): What training his Department provides to diplomats in the execution of an ethical foreign policy. [64595]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): All new entrants attend a one-day human rights course. We run regular courses for other officers, with non-governmental organisation participation. New heads of mission are briefed by the head of the human rights policy department before posting. Where relevant, they are briefed by NGOs such as Amnesty International and the Save the Children Fund.

Mr. Boswell: Does the Minister agree that the logic of the Government's position is that Ministers and diplomats must resist all temptation to discriminate by picking on smaller and perhaps less significant countries in respect of minor defects, because it is safe to do so, while conveniently overlooking much greater defects on the part of countries that are powerful or where major trade interests are involved? Will he remind his diplomats that in those circumstances, and in the context of the Government's general policy, they have not merely a responsibility but an obligation to draw to the authorities' attention any cases of inappropriate discrimination?

Mr. Lloyd: I am delighted to be able to agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman said. Of course it is right and proper that no distinction should be made between abuses of human rights, whether perpetrated by large or small nations. I assure him that the Government try to and succeed in maintaining a consistency of approach, whether such abuses are perpetrated by countries with which we have strong bilateral interests or by those with which we have relatively little contact.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): The House must be heartened to see the sudden interest in a moral and ethical

foreign policy exhibited by the Opposition. Those of us who have been here for the past 18 years certainly did not discern it in the Conservative Government's approach to some of the minor and larger Governments with whom they dealt.

Is my hon. Friend aware that he will have the support of the whole House if he and his colleagues continue to take actions such as those which led to the establishment of the international criminal court, which is clearly needed given the evidence of what we have seen of Milosevic in Kosovo in the past few days?

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend is right. The previous Government's record did not stand close examination in respect of human rights. That was a disgrace, not only for Parliament but for the whole nation. Since the general election, Britain's image has undergone a radical transformation abroad, precisely because of this Government's level of activity. My hon. Friend mentioned the international criminal court, but I could also mention the human rights fund, a changed policy on arms sales, support for the international tribunals in Yugoslavia and Rwanda and many more initiatives, not all of which received support from the Opposition.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): Will the Minister consider it a success for the Government's ethical foreign policy if reports in this weekend's press prove to be accurate? I refer to the report that the Foreign Office assured the Chilean ambassador on Friday 16 October that nothing would happen to Senator Pinochet before 20 October, four days later. However, within 24 hours, Senator Pinochet had been arrested. The Minister will surely understand that suggestions that the senator was entrapped in Britain by the Government, deliberately or through incompetence, will do little to enhance their ethical reputation. Will the Minister now clear up that question for the House?

Mr. Lloyd: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that he should not believe everything that he reads in the press.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Answer the question.

Mr. Lloyd: I intend to answer the question. Had the shadow Foreign Secretary taken the trouble to read *Hansard* this morning, he would have seen that it is already answered today in any case. There is absolutely no truth whatever in such suggestions. No such commitment was given either directly to Senator Pinochet or to his representatives. The House should know that we respect the rights even of Senator Pinochet, which is why his case is now before the judicial system, not the political system—a very important distinction that he did not make in Chile.

Burma

11. **Gillian Merron** (Lincoln): What steps he is taking to encourage democracy in Burma. [64596]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): The United Kingdom is at the forefront of international action to press the Burmese regime to abandon its repressive policies and enter into dialogue with pro-democracy leaders. We supported the renewal and strengthening of the European Union common position in October and co-sponsored the United Nations General Assembly resolution in December.

Gillian Merron: I thank the Minister for that answer. How important does he feel is the role of the BBC World Service in promoting democracy in Burma? Can he reassure the House about the level of financial support being given by the Foreign Office to the BBC World Service to enable it to do that?

Mr. Fatchett: I know that the BBC World Service is widely respected by all those who favour and believe in democracy in Burma. We look forward to the BBC World Service continuing to play an excellent role; that is why the Government have ensured that, over the next three years, the BBC World Service will have a £44.2 million increase in funding, representing an increase of 3.8 per cent. in real terms in each of those years. That increase in real terms contrasts sharply with the 7 per cent. cut in real terms that took place during the last five years of the previous Government. The BBC World Service is valued by Labour; it was cut by the Conservative party.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I am sure that the whole House would agree that the World Service does a wonderful job, and I congratulate the Minister on what has been done for it. Is it not time for the repressive regime in Burma to be brought before an international court for the actions that it has taken against some of its citizens?

Mr. Fatchett: I very much appreciate the comments that the hon. Gentleman has just made about our role with the BBC World Service. As for the regime in Burma, I sympathise with the argument that he made. The regime has the worst record in the world; we continue to condemn that record. We continue to ensure that pressure builds on the regime in Burma, and we feel that it is crucial that that pressure is maintained so that we can ensure that dialogue is engaged with the pro-democracy forces.

Iraq

12. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): When he next intends to discuss the Basra enclave with his US counterpart. [64598]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has no plans to discuss a Basra enclave with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, but we are in frequent contact on a wide range of Iraq-related issues, most recently on 10 January 1999.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On the question of a new approach, are the Government in principle opposed to a sanctions-free Basra enclave in southern Iraq?

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend has advanced that idea for some time. We continue to look at ideas that will enable us to achieve our objectives of disarmament, containment and helping the people of Iraq. I am not yet convinced that my hon. Friend's notion is the best way to proceed, but we shall certainly continue to consider all ideas.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the Government consider a longer-term solution for the people of Basra

and for the other people of Iraq? At the moment, every few months there is yet another crisis in Iraq; yet more bombs are dropped in Iraq; and yet more Iraqi people are killed. The Government have already expressed support for Indict. What steps have the Government taken at the United Nations to indict Saddam Hussein and other Iraqi war criminals, and will the Government make it their policy to support those in Basra and the rest of Iraq who wish to change the Government in Baghdad?

Mr. Fatchett: The hon. Gentleman is right yet again to draw attention to the record of the regime in Baghdad. In much of the current debate, the report by the UN special rapporteur on human rights, Max van der Stoel, is often overlooked, but the most recent report sets out a catalogue of human rights violations by the regime in Baghdad—a catalogue that every hon. Member should look at and remember. The hon. Gentleman is right in saying that the Government support the Indict campaign. It is crucial to remind the world of Saddam Hussein's record, and we shall continue to do so. It would be a perverse person indeed who did not recognise that a change of Government and change of regime in Baghdad would be in the interests of the people of Iraq.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I am pleased that the Government do not favour the Basra enclave option. Would it not lead to the beginning of the break-up of Iraq and problems over which area Basra would be associated with—for instance, with Iran? Given that Basra is the only port in Iraq, the people of Iraq, who are already in very bad economic circumstances, would be cut off from their supplies. If the enclave were established, it would look like American-British occupation.

Mr. Fatchett: We have always said that we want to maintain the territorial and political integrity of Iraq. My hon. Friend makes several important points in that context. We shall certainly continue to ensure the imposition of no-fly zones, which are very important to the security of people in southern and northern Iraq. To remind the House of what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said earlier, those no-fly zones are there to protect the ordinary people of Iraq, and are crucial for that reason.

Nigeria

13. **Mr. Edward Garnier** (Harborough): What steps he is taking to assist in the re-establishment of an independent judiciary in Nigeria. [64599]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): We welcome the steps that Nigeria has taken to strengthen an independent judiciary by the installation of a democratically elected Nigerian Government. Through our good governance fund, which is administered by the high commission in Lagos, we have offered support to civil society, including help for the judicial system and for lawyers specialising in human rights work.

Mr. Garnier: That is no doubt a well-intended answer, but it is not a very clear one. Will the Minister clarify precisely what he means by it?

Mr. Lloyd: Of course I will clarify it. For example, the high commissioner in Abuja made it clear to the Nigerian Attorney-General and Minister of Justice in September that Her Majesty's Government attach the greatest importance to an independent judiciary. To achieve that, we have taken steps with the chief judge of Lagos state and the Nigerian Institute for Advanced Legal Studies to modify court procedures in order to reduce the number of people on remand.

In the second phase of the court assistance programme, chief justices, attorney-generals, bar associations and other eminent lawyers will work with British colleagues to devise other ways in which to implement a case-flow management system. We are arranging for the chief justice of Lagos state to visit legal institutions in Britain early this year. We have a very good record, which will of course improve with a democratic Government in Lagos. We can begin to reinstitute programme aid, which will allow us directly to assist the federal legal system.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Is my hon. Friend aware of the continued failure of the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to communicate or co-operate properly with our high commission in Nigeria on consular cases? I have been trying to pursue a case of a constituent of mine who was murdered in that country. I know that there has been virtually no response from Nigerian authorities. The Nigerian Government give information to oil companies in the country, but those companies do not always—in fact, quite commonly do not—share it with our high commission. Will my hon. Friend make it clear to the Nigerian Government that such a way of operating is unacceptable? Will he tell oil companies that operate in Nigeria that it is unacceptable not to share information on their employees, especially when hostage taking is involved?

Mr. Lloyd: The House will sympathise with my hon. Friend and, indeed, his constituents, who have suffered such a loss. We would all accept that there is a duty not simply on the Foreign Office but on Governments of countries in which British citizens are killed—indeed, murdered—to ensure not only that a full investigation is carried out, but that its results are made available to the families of the victims. If my hon. Friend wants to talk either to me or to my noble Friend Baroness Symons, I am sure that we can find ways in which to pursue the matter for him.

Chile

14. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What measures he has taken to improve the United Kingdom's relations with Chile. [64600]

16. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What ministerial visits to Chile are scheduled in 1999. [64602]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): In recent weeks I have held meetings with both the Foreign Minister and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Chile. During the recess I met our ambassador to Santiago, who was at home on annual leave. The Chilean Foreign Minister and I remain in regular contact and we have both

expressed our determination not to allow the legal process concerning Senator Pinochet to disrupt long-term relations between our countries.

Mr. Wilkinson: What engenders in our natural friends such a profound antipathy towards Her Majesty's Government—an antipathy that is widespread in official circles, but not among the Chilean population? Is it because the Government regard Chile as a country very far away, of which they know extremely little and care even less? Is it because the Government have a predisposition to neo-colonialist interference in other nations' internal affairs? Or is it because the Government have acquired their knowledge of Chile from National Union of Students broadsheets of some 25 years ago?

Mr. Cook: When Mr. Insulza, the Chilean Foreign Minister, left the meeting that he had with me, he said that he fully understood the position taken by the British Government. There was no great antipathy there. As regards the opinion of the people of Chile, last month 44 per cent. said they believed that Senator Pinochet's detention in the United Kingdom was a good thing, and 45 per cent. said that it was bad. There was no massive antipathy there.

Our conduct in the case is governed solely by one consideration, which the hon. Gentleman should share—that we should uphold the rule of law and due legal process. He should be ashamed to plead that we should suspend the rule of law because one of his political friends is in front of it at present.

Mr. Loughton: May I take it from the Foreign Secretary's failure to list any future visits to Chile that he now acknowledges that relations between the United Kingdom and foreign countries are best served and improved when he and his colleagues stay at home, rather than jumping on to Concorde or private jets? Will he acknowledge that, given the Government's admission that British companies are losing business and contracts in Chile, and given the assessment that the trial of General Pinochet could cost the British taxpayer more than £30 million, breaking even the record of the Maxwell brothers, it would have been better to send General Pinochet back home to face due process in his own country, rather than subject the United Kingdom to this expensive and damaging circus?

Mr. Cook: Let us be quite plain about what the hon. Gentleman is asking. He is asking the Government to defy the courts and end due legal process. He is asking us to set aside a legally proper and properly submitted request for extradition from the Spanish authorities. Yes, it may well cost us some money to meet that extradition requirement. The standard basis on which the financial cost of extradition proceedings is met is exactly the same as it was under the Conservative Government: we meet the extradition costs for applications to our country, and Spain meets the extradition costs for applications that we make to Spain. If we expect Spain to honour that, we must honour our side of the bargain.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will the Foreign Secretary take some time to look through the archives in the Foreign Office, and reveal all the documentation available to him about the relationship between past Conservative Governments and the fascist organisations in Chile, and in particular any documentation relating to Operation Condor, under which General Pinochet and Argentinian generals hunted down and assassinated Orlando Letelier, General Prats and others, and a British citizen, William Beausire, was hijacked out of Argentina and subsequently died in Chile? Does the Foreign Secretary accept that revealing everything that we know will help the process of restoring human rights and putting on record the truth of what happened in Chile during the terrible years from 1973 to 1990?

Mr. Cook: I cannot enter into discussion of the substance of the matter that is currently before the courts. In response to my hon. Friend's plea for full disclosure, may I say that we stand ready to assist the courts in any matter in which the courts may seek our assistance.

In view of reports in one of the papers this morning, may I tell the House that at this morning's hearing, Lord Browne-Wilkinson said that he wished to correct the suggestion in the press that the Foreign Office had refused a certificate on grounds of secrecy. He said that that was not correct at all. We will be happy to help the courts in any way that we can.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Does my right hon. Friend remember that the gift of this Parliament to the Chilean Parliament following its first democratic elections after the brutal regime of Pinochet was a copy of the Magna Carta? Is he aware how strongly the people of Chile, particularly those committed to the democratic system, honour the support for human rights that this country has always upheld, and how much we are admired because of our acceptance of an independent legal system that can judge those who condone murder and torture fairly, without political intervention?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes her point perfectly well. The upholding of that independent legal system is central to our democratic constitution, and our respect for it is widely respected throughout Chile.

Sierra Leone

3.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Sierra Leone and Her Majesty's Government's response.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We have followed recent events in Sierra Leone with grave concern. In December, the rebels moved closer to Freetown. On 23 December we took the decision to advise British citizens to leave immediately and organised a Royal Air Force airlift for those British nationals who wanted to leave.

The rebels entered Freetown on 6 January. There then followed more than a week of looting and anarchy in which the rebels amply demonstrated their brutality, which repeatedly has blighted Sierra Leone.

As a result of a counter-offensive by ECOMOG forces, mainly Nigerian troops, the rebels have since been driven out of most of Freetown. Many hundreds of ECOMOG troops have been killed in the fighting. The House will wish to pay its respect to the courage and sacrifice of those who have fought to sustain the legitimate Government of Sierra Leone. We are relieved that the capital has not fallen, but the situation remains worrying. Much of Freetown has been destroyed and much of the rest of the country remains in rebel hands.

Britain has been the principal supporter in the international community for President Kabbah and the legitimate Government of Sierra Leone. First, we have provided more material help to the ECOMOG and Sierra Leone forces than any other nation from outside the region. Following two conversations that I had during the recess with the Nigerian Foreign Minister, we released early this month an additional £1 million pounds-worth of trucks and communication equipment. We have also shared with ECOMOG intelligence on the situation on the ground, and have provided it with maps of Sierra Leone to which it previously did not have access. This morning General Abubakar, Head of State of Nigeria, rang my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to express his thanks for British support and assistance.

Secondly, we have been active in rallying support within the international community. We secured a statement from both the Security Council and the European Union condemning the rebels, and I have given notice that I intend to raise Sierra Leone at next Monday's meeting of European Foreign Ministers. I have also sent a personal message to President Taylor of Liberia demanding that he withdraw support from the rebel forces.

Finally, Britain remains much the largest national donor to Sierra Leone of reconstruction aid and humanitarian assistance. Since the restoration of President Kabbah, Britain has committed more than £20 million in assistance to Sierra Leone. HMS Norfolk has now been stationed off Sierra Leone to provide humanitarian support and assistance. I can today announce to the House that the Government will be urgently releasing another £1 million of humanitarian assistance for the people of Sierra Leone and logistical support for ECOMOG.

We still have a long way to go to restore an integrated, stable Sierra Leone. Britain will remain fully committed to alleviating the suffering of its people, and to providing practical and political support for their right to be ruled by the legitimate Government of their choice.

Mr. Hughes: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I associate myself and, I imagine, all other hon. Members, with his statement of concern and condolence to those who have suffered under what, we understand, have been barbarous conditions.

The Government's efforts have been greatly appreciated in Sierra Leone and by the large Sierra Leonean community in Britain, who are hugely concerned about both the present and the future.

I shall be more specific on one or two matters. Will food aid, which I gather is greatly needed, and assistance with rehousing continue? The Foreign Secretary rightly said that large parts of Freetown have been destroyed. There is a large refugee problem and I understand that items such as tents would be greatly appreciated. Help is also needed in relocating people—in a civilian context, helicopters and other forms of transport would be very acceptable.

Secondly, and understandably, the humanitarian agencies withdrew at about the turn of the year. Are the Government able to be part of the international effort to bring them back to do the work for which they are hugely respected and very much needed?

Lastly, may I encourage the Foreign Secretary, along the lines of a sign that he gave to the House, to say that the Government, together with the Commonwealth and their European Union partners, will work for the security of Sierra Leone, especially along its frontiers, so that it can be allowed to redevelop with integrity and without risk of people from outside coming into the country, something that has so often destabilised it in the past?

Mr. Cook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said in recognition of efforts. He speaks with authority, because he has a large constituency interest in this matter.

We are indeed looking at what might be the most appropriate aid for Sierra Leone. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has arranged for supplies to be flown out to Sierra Leone. They are being distributed with the help of the helicopter from HMS Norfolk, and that was the prime purpose of stationing HMS Norfolk in the region. We are focusing at the moment on urgent medical supplies, but, obviously, the food situation will be kept under review.

I regret to say to the House that the hon. Gentleman is quite right about the refugee situation. We believe that there are more than 200,000 refugees, which is a large proportion of a relatively small country. They will require substantial assistance for relocation and resettlement. James Jonah, the Minister of Finance and senior Cabinet Minister in the Government of Sierra Leone, is currently in London and is, I believe, having talks tomorrow with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development.

Finally, of course the humanitarian aspects of this tragedy can be corrected only within a secure framework of stability. That is why we have tried to bring the sides together, and will continue to press for negotiations and mediation to try to resolve this tragic conflict.

That requires a two-track approach: first, robust engagement on the military front, which we are supporting, but also negotiation to secure political agreement to disarmament and demobilisation.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The whole House will want to join in the expressions of condolence—and, indeed, the tribute—from the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and the Foreign Secretary. The reports that we have read of the scenes in Freetown are gruesome—none the less so because they have not featured on our television screens to the same extent as atrocities elsewhere in the world.

Can the Foreign Secretary explain to the House the remit that has been given to HMS Norfolk and to Brigadier David Richards, the leader of the British military reconnaissance team? Are arms finding their way to the rebels in Sierra Leone from Liberia and elsewhere? If so, is that not a flagrant breach of the United Nations embargo? What action is the UN taking to deal with that breach?

Mr. Cook: Let me clarify the fact that the role of HMS Norfolk is very much in support of humanitarian assistance and relief, and its helicopter has already been making a practical contribution to that. We do not intend for any British military assets to become involved in the military conflict, although we have supplied ECOMOG with non-lethal equipment, such as trucks and communication equipment, and are supporting it with intelligence.

On the question of the supply of arms, the legal position is perfectly clear. There is a UN embargo, which applies to any of the rebel forces or the forces outside the control of ECOMOG or the Sierra Leone Government. Any breach of that embargo would be a crime in British law. I am not, at present, aware of any such breach. I have heard of a press report of such a breach, and that report has been drawn to the attention of Customs and Excise.

I agree absolutely with the right hon. and learned Member that the scenes in Freetown were harrowing. We must make sure that, as we vigorously pursue those who commit atrocities within the European continent, there are no double standards and that we equally vigorously pursue those who are the perpetrators of such atrocities in Africa.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Sierra Leone is a friendly Commonwealth country, and it is right, in its time of travail, that this Government should play such as a leading role in its relief. My right hon. Friend mentioned two points. First, it is alleged that British companies are involved in the supply of arms to the rebels—the AFRC/RUF. How rigorously is Customs and Excise looking into those allegations, which were made two weeks or so ago in the British press? Secondly, President Taylor of Liberia is alleged to be not only supplying arms and men to the AFRC/RUF rebels, but making territorial claims on Sierra Leone. To what extent are we and our allies seeking to exercise leverage on President Taylor? I presume that he is fairly dependent on external aid, so there must be means by which we can put pressure on him.

Mr. Cook: It is not for me to speak on behalf of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, but I am confident that it will rigorously pursue the evidence and any lead that it has about breaches of the embargo. On the other matter that my hon. Friend raises, I sent a strong message to President Taylor on 31 December demanding that all support for the rebels stop immediately. My hon. Friend rightly points out the extent to which Liberia also requires support from the outside world. I pointed out to President Taylor that continuing support for instability and insecurity in Sierra Leone could damage Liberia's standing with international financial institutions. It is important that all countries of the region support the regional strategy of trying to ensure stability and security in Sierra Leone and play their part in backing the ECOMOG forces.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): The Foreign Secretary said that he would raise the matter of Sierra Leone with his colleagues in the European Union, but he did not say what he would say to them. What proposals might he have when he raises the matter?

In connection with present assistance, there is the British military mission. Does the Foreign Secretary believe that it would be right to give, if required, military assistance to the legitimate Government, although not, of course, to the rebels?

Mr. Cook: With respect to the forthcoming meeting on Monday, I shall make the same appeal to my colleagues in Europe as I have already made to other Governments, including only on Saturday to Madeleine Albright of the United States—that is, for other western nations to join us in ensuring that ECOMOG has the logistical support, the equipment and the finance to continue with its important work.

We should remember that the ECOMOG expeditionary force in Sierra Leone costs Nigeria £1 million a day. That is a large sum for a Government who are wrestling with their legacy from years of abuse and corruption by the previous military junta. In terms of the supply of weapons to Sierra Leone, for some time, the legal position has been that it is not contrary to UN law to supply the Sierra Leone Government, but it would be contrary to the UN resolution and embargo to supply the rebel forces. Sierra Leone is a country with too many forces too well armed. One way to secure peace and stability there would be to dry up the supply of firearms to forces outside the Government, and we shall play our part in doing so.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Will my right hon. Friend look at the wider implications of this conflict? It is one of a number of conflicts in Africa where secessionist groups or attempted coups have led to civil conflict and mass movements of refugees. Is it not time that the international community, particularly the Commonwealth and the European Union, worked collectively towards building an international force or security architecture to assist small countries facing well-armed insurgency?

Mr. Cook: We are very willing to play our part in peacekeeping intervention. In the context of Africa, Britain plays a leading role in training African forces for peacekeeping missions. In terms of troops on the ground, the correct way to proceed is to look to African states, through bodies such as ECOWAS—the Economic Community of West African States—in west Africa and

[Mr. Cook]

the Organisation of African Unity elsewhere to supply troops for the peacekeeping enterprises. We can certainly supply the training and some of the logistic and communications support, and we are doing much of that in the case of ECOMOG.

The great tragedy of Sierra Leone is that it is one of the poorest countries in the world, yet it is potentially rich in diamonds and in agricultural and fishery resources. It is essential that we provide stability, security and peace, so that those resources can be properly exploited by the people, and not by the armed forces who are rebelling against the Government.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Is President Kabbah in Freetown or in Conakry, and is our high commissioner, Mr. Penfold, with him? If he is, has the Foreign Office ensured that, this time, the high commissioner has secure communications with London—something that was missing during the previous situation?

Lastly, the Foreign Secretary said that we were supplying non-lethal equipment to ECOMOG. If it requested lethal equipment—which it may well do—would the British Government supply it?

Mr. Cook: On the positioning of the two people to whom the right hon. Gentleman referred, we understand that President Kabbah remains in Freetown. Mr. Penfold, our high commissioner in Sierra Leone, was withdrawn over Christmas with other British nationals and has since been in Britain. He recently returned to Sierra Leone, and he is currently in Conakry awaiting a flight to take him to Freetown. Once back in Freetown, he will have access to our high commission and to the communications that were always available there.

On the right hon. Gentleman's last point, we shall consider any such request. However, he will be aware that there is an embargo against Nigeria. Progress in meeting such a request must be balanced against progress within Nigeria on the democratic track, which, at some future time, we are ready to reward with a winding down of the embargo that was placed on the previous military junta.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): The Foreign Secretary will be aware of the great concern of the large Sierra Leonean community in my constituency and across London about events in Sierra Leone and how grateful they are for the Government's humanitarian effort. He will also be aware that longer-term policy issues arise out of the civil war that has criss-crossed this region since independence. One of those issues is whether, in the future, the House should consider what could be done to regulate companies of mercenaries such as Sandline.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for expressing her appreciation of the British role in Sierra Leone. We are not aware of any British mercenary involvement in the current conflict, but we shall obviously try to ensure that any such activity is within the bounds set by United Nations resolutions, which we shall seek to enforce if any mercenary activity is brought to our attention.

At their meeting in Abidjan at the end of December, the countries of the region called for the withdrawal of all external mercenary involvement in Sierra Leone. Those countries are suspicious that there is substantial mercenary involvement on the side of the rebels. It would be in the interests of the country and the region if that mercenary involvement were stopped.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that he is pursuing a negotiated settlement to this dispute, and is not putting international and British forces on one side of a civil war? Does he agree that the election of President Kabbah is under question by many Sierra Leoneans? Would it not be better to promote a settlement in which we work towards the election of a Government elected by the all the people of Sierra Leone under Commonwealth supervision?

Mr. Cook: We should remember that President Kabbah is the elected leader of the Government and the people of Sierra Leone. The rebel forces have a very robust approach to democracy and freedom of expression: they lop off the arms of anyone who disagrees with them. In those circumstances, I cannot accept the hon. Gentleman's even-handed approach. We are committed to restoring the legitimate Government of Sierra Leone at some appropriate point. It will be necessary to negotiate a political settlement that provides for the demobilisation and demilitarisation of the rebel forces, but we must not be tricked into thinking that these are legitimate rebels fighting a civil war with any degree of popular support.

Points of Order

3.50 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. During Foreign Office questions, the Foreign Secretary—perhaps inadvertently—gave an entirely wrong answer to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on the question of the return of Senator Pinochet to Chile. The Foreign Secretary said that Senator Pinochet could not be allowed to return to Chile without setting aside the rule of law. It has never been in dispute, and was expressly—

Madam Speaker: Order. I recognise that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is a distinguished Member of this House. However, he knows that this is an argument that he must have with the Government, and not by means of a point of order. He must find other methods through the Order Paper and through debate in this House to pursue this matter.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): On a wholly different point of order, of which I have given you prior notice, Madam Speaker. In column 631 of yesterday's *Hansard*, you will see that I made some critical comments of the former Paymaster General. The then Deputy Speaker in the Chair intervened and said:

> "We should remind ourselves that, unless there is a substantive motion before us, we should not criticise other Members of the House."—[*Official Report*, 18 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 631.]

If that rule were to be implemented in the strict way expressed by the Deputy Speaker, there would be no political debate. I suspect that the Deputy Speaker went somewhat further than he may have intended. Perhaps, either on this or some subsequent occasion, you might care to clarify the position.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order, and I have read the ruling of my Deputy to which he has drawn attention. There is a fine line to be drawn between criticism of a Member's political action and their personal conduct which was not crossed in the exchanges yesterday. I am satisfied that, following the remarks made about the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), it was appropriate for my Deputy to caution the House. I believe that it was a caution that Members should not reflect on the personal conduct of the former Paymaster General. As the House well knows, the personal conduct of hon. Members can be discussed only on a substantive motion, drawn in proper terms. This protection, which is afforded to all right hon. and hon. Members, is set out in the current edition of "Erskine May", pages 384-5. I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for letting me put this on record.

BILL PRESENTED

House of Lords

Mrs. Margaret Beckett, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Cook, Mr. Secretary Straw, Dr. Jack Cunningham, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mrs. Ann Taylor, Secretary Marjorie Mowlam, Mr. Secretary Michael and Mr. Geoffrey Hoon presented a Bill to end membership of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage; to make related provision about disqualifications for voting at elections to, and for membership of, the House of Commons; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 34].

Orders of the Day

Greater London Authority Bill

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

(Clauses 1 to 4 and Schedules 1 and 2)

Considered in Committee, pursuant to the Order [15 December].

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

THE AUTHORITY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

3.53 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I would like to take a brief opportunity to set out the reasons for my opposition to the clause, which stem from my reservations about how the Bill itself—and, therefore, the clause—came about. The Bill is the result of the use of the technique of referendum. I believe that the referendum is a dubious means of arriving at complex political decisions.

The decision—which, on the face of it, looked seductively simple, as does the clause—must be one of the more complex that we have encountered not just in this Parliament, but for a long time. The relevant question, however, was put to the people of London in a referendum. That in itself was bad enough, because, as I have always contended, it is always difficult to reduce a complex political question legitimately to a simple proposition that requires a simple yes or no answer. In this case, the crime was compounded because the Government failed to put to the people of London a question that would distinguish their desire for, on the one hand, a mayor as a component of the Greater London Authority and, on the other, an assembly. The clause is based on a false premise, because an invalid question was put to the people of London, so the answer that they gave was also invalid.

I am glad to say that one of my hon. Friends has introduced a private Member's Bill that will give us an opportunity to consider the matter, but a serious question that we should already have considered about referendums as a mechanism for political decision making concerns the turnout. As we all know, pathetically few people were sufficiently engaged by the question to take the trouble to vote in the referendum in London.

I have heard Ministers claiming that there is "overwhelming" support for the proposition adumbrated in the clause, but we know that only about one in three Londoners were sufficiently overwhelmed to bother to vote. If we are to have such abuse of the technique of referendum, we should quickly have a long-overdue look at the way in which the referendum is used as a mechanism for political decision making. I hope that we will not be further subjected to the claim that the people of London came flocking to endorse the proposition, because that is nonsense and will be seen as such.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does my right hon. Friend recollect that the referendum was held on the same day as the London borough elections and that the turnout on that day was lower than in previous London borough elections?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point, which allows me to say, strictly in passing, that I am proud of the fact that my borough had the lowest yes vote of any borough in Greater London.

The clause encapsulates the basis of the whole Bill, which is extremely undesirable because it imposes a whole new layer of bureaucracy on the people of London. It has been said, and it will no doubt be said again as we continue our discussions, that the mayor and assembly will somehow be a benefit to the people of London. I have been in the political business long enough to be dubious about the proposition that the more layers of bureaucrats we have, the greater is the benefit to the people, but that is what is being argued.

We will have to spend a long time considering in detail the proposition that more bureaucrats and politicians will bring greater benefits to the people of London. Londoners already have elected borough councillors, Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament, all beavering away to give effect to their wishes and desires. Now they will have an elected mayor and assembly members.

I will not go into detail about the cost of the bureaucracy, buildings, salaries, expenses, special assistants and all the other nonsense, to say nothing of the travelling this and living that—I suspect that we may return to all that at greater length later—because the real point is not only the undesirability in principle of more politicians and bureaucrats, but the conflicts that will inevitably arise among all the different elected representatives of the people of London.

Conflicts are bound to develop as the powers of the mayor and the assembly develop, inevitably at the expense of the boroughs. I hope that that problem will come out as we consider the Bill, although I do not know how we are to resolve it, because if we agree to the clause, all the nonsenses in the other 250-odd clauses will follow as night follows day.

Ministers must give the Committee some idea of how the Bill will work to the benefit of the people of London, those for whom we are supposed to be legislating, when it contains a prescription for continuing and growing conflict at every level in the making and implementation of policy between the people elected, supposedly, to represent the people of London.

4 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I shall intervene on the right hon. Gentleman only once. How does he explain the logic of his position, unless he is arguing that it is better to keep the status quo under which Parliament and the Government of the whole country—irrespective of their majority in London—make decisions for London rather than those decisions being made by people chosen by Londoners, who may be argued to have a more local interest?

Is not the logic of what the right hon. Gentleman says that there should be only one Government in Britain at all levels of decision making? Yet, everywhere else in Britain there are tiers of government. He used to represent a

constituency in Worcestershire where there are parish, district and county councils. In Scotland, there are other tiers of government. Is he arguing that we should have only one tier of elected representatives for all the United Kingdom?

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but the direct answer is no, although I would disagree vehemently with holding up the administration of our counties as some sort of model. The hon. Gentleman's question is perfectly valid, but I challenge his assumption that London is a political entity that merits the sort of representation that the Bill will impose on it. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman because I am comfortable with the status quo, as I believe that the boroughs legitimately represent the peoples of London in all their diversity. I am glad to see in the Chamber my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), who shares the borough of Bromley with me.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): And me.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) shares it too—the borough of Bromley is fully represented in the Chamber. One reason why the good folk of Bromley were the least enthusiastic about the Bill is that they feel absolutely no commonality of interest with people not just in central London, but with the people in the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) and for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). I say nothing detrimental about those constituencies or their boroughs, but my hon. Friends may agree that the common interests that the people of those area share with Bromley are, to say the least, minimal.

The core of the difficulty with the Bill is that it seeks to treat the length, breadth, might and greatness of London as if the capital were one simple-minded political entity that can be legitimately represented by an assembly. I challenge that assumption; it was wrong from the start. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) posed a legitimate question, but I am content with the status quo, and I believe that added bureaucracy will be unnecessary and costly, and will give rise to conflicts that could damage the interests of Londoners in all their diversity. Let me put it beyond all doubt that I am totally against clause 1, which is misconceived and wrongly based, and which will damage the people of London.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Committee stage begins a long process that will pass from the full light of the Chamber to the slightly less full light of the Committee Rooms upstairs, where the hours will be longer and the labours no less hard. The Liberal Democrats support clause 1, but I wish to raise one matter arising from what the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions said on Second Reading when we explored the nature of the beast to come.

As the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has clearly grasped, clause 1 sets up sets up the authority, with the words:

"There shall be an authority for Greater London".

On 14 December, I sought to get out of the Secretary of State whether that authority was equivalent to regional government. It had started off being described as such, but then it became city government and local government. I thought that the issue was worth pursuing and the right hon. Gentleman's answer is worth repeating. He said:

"It is in between, in a way".—[*Official Report*, 14 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 624.]

That comment lends itself to further exploration.

One could argue validly, as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has done, that Greater London is not an entity and should not have countywide or citywide government. However, some of us have accepted that the development of metropolitan London with a green belt around it, makes Greater London a natural, large metropolitan community. One sees that that is the case when one flies into London.

Obviously, there is a greater south-east region. However, if the Government are committed to regional government, as the Secretary of State and Ministers say that they are, what is the region for which they envisage that we will get such government as it affects London? If it is to be Greater London—some people may not like that—and we are to have a London development agency, which is meant to be the embryo for regional government, as are such agencies in the rest of the country, why are we not to have regional government? It could be developed later and its powers could be varied, but why can we not say honestly and openly now, "This is regional government"?

Of course, London is different from other regions, such as the west midlands, which is not one place—Birmingham is represented by one authority, Coventry is next door and so forth. London is one place, but it is a city state-type region. Many capital cities have their own governments, for example, Washington and Canberra. They are a sort of variation on a theme—another tier of government above local government.

I hope that the Minister will tell us that London is to be the region that the Government will recognise for regional government purposes and that we are committed to having such government. It is a serious matter and his colleagues on the Labour Benches will be interested to hear the answer. We Liberal Democrats would support that idea. If that is to be the case, why not say so now? Why not say that the assembly is the embryo—the starting point of the Greater London regional authority, which will provide London with regional government—and get on with the job?

Finally, if that is the case, I accept that how one combines citywide and regional government is an issue. I will not argue that London should be parallel with and similar to the other English regions. I do not think that it should be for reasons that are self-evident. My hon. Friends and I are clear that Greater London requires government to be delivered by an authority above borough level. We disagree with the views expressed by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and we associate ourselves with those expressed by the great majority of Londoners.

Mr. Forth *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman suggests that the view in favour is not held by the great majority, but all the opinion polls show that the great majority of Londoners want a democratic regional tier of government to be re-established. They would prefer elected representatives to

[Mr. Hughes]

make decisions about their city rather than civil servants. On that basis, we believe that we must start by saying that we will have a greater regional authority.

Mr. Forth: I regret the fact that the hon. Gentleman continues to peddle that nonsense. If Londoners support that idea, as he claims, why did they not bother to turn out and cast a vote when given the opportunity to do so in the referendum? It is one thing to ask questions in an opinion poll and, if we are to run the country by opinion polls, I will offer the deal that I always offer on such occasions to any colleague: can we have a binding poll on the return of capital punishment? If the hon. Gentleman intends to rest his case on that argument, I have no doubt that he will sign up wholeheartedly to such a poll.

Mr. Hughes: I will not be distracted by an opinion poll on capital punishment, except to say that there are differences between the way in which one settles constitutional and ethical issues—they are always entirely different.

I would argue—as a Scot, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst should understand this—that it is just as much the settled will of the people of Greater London that there should be Londonwide democratic government as it is the settled will of the people of Scotland that there should be a Parliament in Scotland. Since the Greater London council was abolished, whatever the criticisms of the GLC era—or, in smaller boundaries, of the London county council before that—whenever asked, most of the people of London have said that they want such government. I have never seen an opinion poll that has not shown that. Of course, a majority of Londoners did not go to the polling booths for the local election day referendum, but Conservatives have often been elected in local elections with small votes on small turnouts of 20 or 30 per cent. The Government rightly want to increase turnout, as we do.

One reason why there was not a massive turnout was that it was obvious from opinion polling that there would be an overwhelming yes vote. With the best will in the world, I pay tribute to the Minister. The Secretary of State turned out to play football at Wembley—not a pretty sight but he was there. I made an effort in the campaign, appearing on buses with Ministers and others. There was even a song produced. It did not take off, but we tried to get some interest going. It was so obvious that people wanted London government back that many thought that they did not need to turn out. If it had been a needle match, the number of people voting would have risen.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst argued that there was not great enthusiasm in Bromley. That may be true; Bromley is a place of lesser enthusiasm than some parts of the country. Even in his borough, the majority of those who cast votes voted in favour. Even though he is in the borough of the lukewarm, the lukewarm were in favour of Greater London.

I hope that the Minister accepts that this is a probing debate about regional government, which we favour. Why cannot London have it, and have it this year?

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): I rise to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). We have two concerns. First, as he rightly noted, we are on the outer fringe of London. The position is worse than he proclaimed, because my constituents in Orpington would rather be in Kent, as they were historically, than in Greater London. Sadly, they were moved by a Conservative Government.

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): The hon. Gentleman was not a Conservative then.

Mr. Horam: That is as may be, but, happily, I opposed the creation of the GLC and was proved to be right because it was later abolished by a Conservative Government.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, we are concerned about the level of bureaucracy. While I admit that the representatives will be democratically elected, there will be more councillors, more bodies and all the spin-offs that will flow from that fact. It is a retrograde step, and typical of the Government, both in respect of London and of the proposals for devolution, that they have come up with dense, complicated and expensive conclusions and proposals.

Equally, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, it is fair to say that there was strong support for a voice for London. All opinion polls suggested that people were sorry that at various times, such as when bidding for the Olympic games, there was not a person or body to stand up and support a case for London in the wider scheme of things. That is one reason why people supported a new voice for London when it was put to them in the referendum in the whole Greater London area, although they did not vote for the re-creation of the old Greater London authority.

There was a way through the dilemma. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey would agree that in a sense, the case for a voice for London is an inner London case that is at its strongest in the sort of area that he represents, where there are genuine problems with education, health, transport and living standards that should be tackled on a broader basis than is possible under the arrangements that were created long ago by a Conservative Government.

4.15 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is quite right: I accept that the further out one goes, the more one sees that areas, such as the one he represents, that historically have belonged to the counties of Surrey and Kent feel less a part of Greater London. When the Committee considers voting systems, some of us will argue that we should try to group areas together in natural communities, because the people of Kent in London have a view that naturally differs from that of the people of Surrey in London.

Mr. Horam: The hon. Gentleman has anticipated my point. There is a solution to the problem which is much simpler than the one the Government have proposed: it is to group together some of the inner London boroughs, perhaps in a new borough—a single borough, without two or three tiers—covering Westminster, Kensington, parts of Southwark and Lambeth and so on. It would be a central London borough similar to what is found in Paris,

where there is a Paris municipal authority covering not the whole of Paris as we know it, but an area that is roughly enclosed by the peripherique and which is but a small part of the total urban area of Paris. That municipal authority deals successfully with the problems of central Paris; similarly, with no extra councillors—indeed, with a reduction in the number of local authorities, because several would have been combined into one—we could have a body that could speak for London and deal with the problems of inner London.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I speak as a former leader of Croydon council. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the strategic issues of the environment, the economy and an integrated transport system for London must embrace outer London as well as inner London? The idea of having a separately defined inner London is obviously ridiculous.

Mr. Horam: The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me, because, as has already been said, the issues to which he refers go well beyond the boundaries of Greater London. About 17,000 people a day commute into the city from my constituency, and many pass through Orpington as they come from Sevenoaks and beyond, so it is clear that we have to consider an area greater than that which will be covered by the Greater London authority. That is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), a former Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment, described as a geographical question, involving geographical balance.

Some issues affecting London go far wider than the Greater London authority area—for example, transport issues affecting road and rail networks go right to the coast—whereas questions of health and education are far narrower, with inner London issues differing from those of Bromley, Uxbridge and so on. The Government have had to solve that problem. Sadly, they have not come up with a simple effective solution, but one that is overcomplicated, over-expensive and messy.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): The one undisputed fact is that, in the referendum, the majority either said no, or expressed no opinion. That cannot be ignored.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is it not true that, under the previous Administration, in ballots on whether schools should opt out, the Conservatives had a rule that a vote not cast was a yes vote? Using that method, there was an overwhelming majority in favour of having a Greater London authority.

Mr. Ottaway: I have absolutely no idea whether the hon. Gentleman is right or wrong on that point.

One of the interesting features of having taken all the stages of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill on the Floor of the House, and of having had the referendum since then, is that, now that we have reached the debate on the real thing, many of the arguments—those on the fundamental principles—already feel rather well rehearsed. Although a huge amount of the detail in the Bill before us will be debated upstairs in Standing Committee, certain key facts have emerged.

First, it has now been accepted by the Conservative party and by the Government that the Conservatives were right to abolish the Greater London council. We make no apology for having done so: it was in our 1983 manifesto. The current Government, in their determination not to return to the bad old ways of the GLC, have belatedly recognised that we were right and that Labour's opposition at the time was misconceived. The Government have added that to the long list of matters on which they have changed their mind. As John Maynard Keynes, whose views appear to be gaining ascendancy in the Labour party, said:

"When the circumstances change, my opinion changes."

Many good reasons have been given for abolishing the GLC: it was bloated, over-bureaucratic, inefficient, incompetent and used as a regional power base for party politics. Its management of London's transport was so hopeless that we had to take that power away from the GLC. Its leaders called for the abolition of the monarchy and its hostility to business was an embarrassment.

Mr. Davies: If the hon. Gentleman's statement that abolition of the GLC was in the Conservative manifesto is found to be incorrect—I believe that it was not a manifesto commitment—will he make a formal apology for misleading the Committee?

Mr. Ottaway: If I am not correct, I shall withdraw my remark—that goes without saying.

It was no surprise that London's economy took off shortly after the abolition of the GLC, and has been sustained ever since. However, with hindsight, there is possibly another reason why abolishing the GLC was the right thing to do.

London is a city of villages. All of its boroughs have a different complexion. Historic Greenwich, with its cultural centres, is very different from the Manhattan skyline of Croydon, with its focus on the business community. Both areas have their problems—deprivation, unemployment and poor services—but each has its strong points, and its own identity and approach. That local identity is represented by the boroughs.

In place of the GLC, the London boroughs, as unitary authorities, have been strengthened. In all honesty, some boroughs are better run than others. However, there is no doubt that every borough is run better than it was run under the old GLC regime. The reason is clear: each borough has its own notion of its community's aims and objectives. The parameters for councillors and officers are clearly defined: it is their patch and they know how to get on with it.

That is why London is the greatest city on earth. One could not find another city that has such a rich heritage and so wide a variety of cultures. One could not hope to find another capital that is so full of good humour, civilisation and energy. London is an economic powerhouse, an artistic showcase and, above all, an incredibly creative, tolerant and free-spirited town in which to live.

The Conservatives are the first to recognise that the world has moved on since 1986. It is a fast-moving, media-driven world and we are the first to acknowledge that we have developed our view about the need for co-ordination in London. However, we believe in a much lighter touch than do the Government or the Liberal Democrats, who take an even more heavy-handed approach. On Second Reading, the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and

[Mr. Ottaway]

Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), described our vision for London as "thin gruel". Despite the way in which he made that remark, I suggest that there is nothing wrong with thin gruel—indeed, the hon. Gentleman will find it on the menu of most breakfast emporiums because it is healthy.

We believe that our approach and our vision for London, involving a lighter touch and the mayor co-ordinating the London boroughs, is far more in tune with what London needs. To that extent, the ultimate challenge for the mayor will lie in his ability to co-ordinate the London boroughs. That relationship with the London boroughs is our greatest concern, and it is a factor that we shall address in subsequent amendments. We believe in an authority in which the mayor is able to input London's needs at Cabinet level and to sell London internationally. However, we are concerned that the mayor is not being given any real freedom to manoeuvre.

The Secretary of State retains ultimate powers of override in every key area. The all-embracing power of clause 27 allows the Secretary of State to prevent the mayor from doing anything he wants. A complete straitjacket of reserve powers governs policy and action. Another major concern is that the mayor and his office will set up a ministerial rather than a local government model. The mayor will not have to disclose the material that is used to brief him when making decisions, nor will he have to give evidence to the assembly.

The mayor will have great patronage through his appointment to various functional bodies and sway over planning and development issues. However, his decisions will not necessarily be debated in public, be open to scrutiny or subject to clear, open and independent financial and legal advice as would occur under the normal local government regime that every council operates. None the less, we support the principle of the mayor, and it logically follows that we support the principle of an authority. We have many suggestions to make about the conduct of the authority and the way in which that can be approved. However, so that the debate can develop we accept that the clause should stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Raynsford: The purpose of the clause is simple and straightforward: it establishes the Greater London authority and, in doing so, rectifies an historic injustice done to London in 1986.

The Bill restores a democratic, citywide government to London, so the people of London will once again be able to elect their own authority—their mayor and their assembly—to represent them. They will no longer be dependent on the wishes of Cabinet Ministers, shadowy quangos, joint boards and other unaccountable bodies, which, for the past 13 years, have ultimately made the key decisions about the future of our capital city.

The Bill also provides for the authority to have the functions that are transferred to, conferred on or imposed on the authority by this Bill or any other.

The Government were elected on a promise to create a new authority for London. We set out our proposals on how we would honour that promise in our White Paper in March last year. We submitted that White Paper to the people of London in a referendum last May and they voted yes by a majority of 72 per cent. The Bill gives effect to the proposals set out in the White Paper endorsed by the people of London.

Some hon. Members have revealed that they still hanker after life in the past. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) clearly does not want to believe what has happened in 1997 and 1998. I know that it is painful for him, but the world moves on. He is no longer part of a large majority on the Government Benches; he is in opposition. The people of London voted overwhelmingly for Labour Members in the 1997 general election.

Mr. Forth: No they didn't.

Mr. Raynsford: They did. They voted for 57 Labour Members and only 11 Conservatives in 1997. That was a decisive victory for the Labour party.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): Does the Minister recall that, a year after the abolition of the Greater London council, 57 Conservative Members were returned in London?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman could not have made my case better. It is a measure of how the people of London have changed their view about who should represent them in Parliament that we now have an overwhelming majority of Labour Members. The fact that the people of London are keen to have their own citywide authority again is demonstrated by the fact that such a large majority of them voted in the referendum in Bromley, in Hillingdon and in every other London borough. Whatever the wishes of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, his electors gave a majority vote to our proposals.

Listening to the right hon. Gentleman, I felt sympathetic to his proposition that there should be fewer politicians. We are giving effect to that. We are creating a small, streamlined authority consisting of a mayor and 25 assembly members for a city of 7 million people. One will not find a more streamlined, cost-effective, democratic assembly anywhere in the world. This is a model of non-bureaucratic administration.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Minister for his sympathy, which I shall cherish for a long time to come. How can he argue that there will be fewer politicians in London as a result of the Bill? Fewer than how many? Today, we know how many politicians are being carried on our shoulders and are spending our taxes. Surely the Minister must accept that if the measure is passed, there will be more politicians and bureaucrats in London. How can he conclude otherwise?

Mr. Raynsford: The right hon. Gentleman obviously cannot remember the size of the GLC, which he so disliked. We are proposing an authority that is approximately a quarter of the size of the GLC. As I have stressed to him, this will be the smallest, most streamlined authority of any major city in the world. It will be an example of good, efficient administration, not a bureaucratic organisation.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has gone back over ground that we covered on Second Reading. He would like to use

the term "regional" to describe the body that we are creating, but that is not appropriate. As the capital city of our country, London is unique and it requires a unique solution. It is going to have a unique solution—a citywide authority. Regions outside London will require their own model. The hon. Gentleman recognised that there was a difference between the kind of pattern appropriate in a densely occupied city with a large population and that which applies in other regions which are a mixture of rural and urban areas.

4.30 pm

The Government are committed to moving towards directly elected regional government, where there is popular support for it. The creation of voluntary regional chambers in the regions outside London is a first step in that direction, but the proposals in the Bill are not intended to be a template for regional patterns of government elsewhere. They are intended to meet the specific needs of London for effective government in London.

We are trying to respond to the needs of London. The legislation sets out a new form of governance which recognises the need for a strategic overview in the design and implementation of policies which will affect the lives of more than 7 million people. It will be a Greater London authority, not a regional authority.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I was originally going to intervene on the Minister to say that in the Chamber there is no better example of moving on than the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who started life as a young communist and has ended up as a right-wing Tory. The right hon. Gentleman should know about moving on.

I understand what the Minister is saying. My colleagues and I do not dissent from the view that London is entirely different because it is a metropolitan area and a capital city. I am trying to discover where the Government are putting it in the scheme of English constitutional reform. Does the fact that London is different mean that there will not be regional government for London in addition to the citywide government being created by the Bill? If we are to have a unique form of government, the Government should be honest and say as much, and not introduce all the accoutrements of local government such as the local government boundary commission and local government rules. Let us call it citywide government or unique citywide Londonwide government; let us rejoice in its uniqueness and capital city pre-eminence, but please do not let us call it local government when it is really no such thing.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is tilting at windmills. We have not called it local government. He heard me say that we are proposing a unique form of governance for a unique city. We are creating a new form of citywide government for our capital city. I hope that we have agreement on that. I shall not be tempted into a discussion of the ramifications of regional government because that would take a long time and take us far from the matters in hand—

Mr. Hughes: It is because the Minister has no ideas.

Mr. Raynsford: I do indeed have all sorts of ideas, but I shall not debate them with the hon. Gentleman this afternoon.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I have just been to check on this contentious issue with the Library, and I think that I might be able to enlighten the Committee. The Library assures me that London is one of the nine regions in England designated under NUTS—a very appropriate expression. NUTS stands for the nomenclature of units of territorial statistics, as designated by—guess who?—our old friend the European Union. In order to organise us to suit its affairs, the EU has designated the United Kingdom as comprising 12 regions—Scotland, Wales, Ireland, London and eight others—so London is a region. Basically, all this is done at the insistence of the EU. London and the rest of us are being slotted in according to the EU's designation, but the fact remains that London is a region.

Mr. Raynsford: Hearing the hon. Lady talking about NUTS tempts me to go way beyond the subject in hand. I assure her that we are setting in place a system of citywide government for London which is, for certain purposes, treated as a region. However, unlike any other region in the United Kingdom, it is a uniquely urban area. It is not the mixture of urban and rural areas covering a much larger geographical area, which is the characteristic of the other regions. The hon. Lady will accept that there are differences.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) seemed to hark back not just to 1986, when the GLC was abolished, but to 1888 when the London county council was established. He seemed to be arguing the case for an inner London authority, but not an authority covering the rest of London. I have to tell him that the world has moved on a great deal since 1888. He also raised the interesting question of whether there should be a new constituency. I am happy to be able to tell the Committee that the Government have accepted the recommendations of the Local Government Commission on the constituencies that will be adopted for the Greater London assembly elections. Those constituencies—14 in total—will be as recommended by the commission. There will, therefore, be new constituencies, and members of the assembly will be elected in part from those constituencies. The other 11 members will be elected from the lists. We shall discuss that subject in later debates.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), speaking as official spokesman for the Opposition, once again had difficulty with the referendum. Whatever conclusions he draws about how people who did not vote might have voted, in this country, we treat election results on the basis of those people who voted, and of those people who voted, 72 per cent. voted in favour of our proposition. By any count, that was a large and decisive majority. I make no apology whatever for repeating the fact that we are acting on the basis of the support of the people of London.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South made no apology for the abolition of the Greater London council. That is curious because, whereas our position is strongly endorsed by the people of London, the former Conservative Government abolished the GLC in the face of the obvious overwhelming hostility of the people of London, who wanted their own democratic citywide authority. That Government left London, alone of all major cities in the world, with no one to speak for it—

[Mr. Raynsford]

with no one representing its interests in the United Kingdom or overseas. That situation is a problem, which we are now remedying.

Mr. Ottaway: But the Minister will recognise that, in his Green Paper, "New Leadership for London", he says:

"This is not an exercise in bringing back the Greater London Council".

Mr. Raynsford: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. We know that the world moves on, and we are devising new models, appropriate to our period. That does not mean that we believe that the previous Government were right to abolish the GLC; it was a mistake. It was an affront to democracy in London, and we are remedying that, but we are devising a new model of governance appropriate for the 21st century instead of harking back—as the hon. Member for Orpington does—to models of governance created in the 19th century.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South spoke about limitations on the mayor's powers. He dug up some hoary old chestnuts about clause 27. Before we reach that clause, I should tell him that it is part of a slice of the Bill that relates to the mayor's overall powers. It follows clause 25, which gives the mayor wide-ranging powers. Clause 27 contains limitations specifically to protect the interests of London boroughs. Everything that the hon. Gentleman and the Conservative party have said suggests to me that they support the London boroughs, and would not want the mayor to have powers to do things that the London boroughs are expressly charged with doing. That is the purpose of clause 27, and anyone who reads it carefully—as critics who have accused us of unreasonably limiting the mayor's power should—will see that the mayor's powers are extensive, but that they are limited in respect of specific functions which should be discharged either by the boroughs or by other authorities. The aim is to avoid duplication.

I also put it to the hon. Member for Croydon, South—he will find this an uncomfortable fact, which we shall hear more often in these debates—that the argument about our limiting the mayor's power is pretty rich coming from the Conservatives. When, in 1962, the Conservative party—the hon. Gentleman was probably a member of that party at the time, unlike the hon. Member for Orpington—introduced the Bill that became the London Government Act 1963, which created the Greater London council, it contained 94 clauses, so it was about a third of the length of the Bill before us, but it contained 140 references to the powers of the Secretary of State and Ministers to control that authority. That is even more references than there are in our Bill. The record of that Government will be exposed if ever the hon. Member for Croydon, South or his colleagues try to accuse us of unreasonably restricting the power of the Greater London authority.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, because we are on the first clause of a long furrow. I am in an especially strong position to know that, in 1962, the Minister was a Minister, not a Secretary of State. Unintentionally, the Minister has misled the Committee.

Mr. Raynsford: I hope that I made it clear that the 140 references were to powers available to Ministers and Secretaries of State. There were 123 references to the powers of the Minister and 17 to the powers of the Secretary of State. We have done our research carefully. The relevant Minister was a Minister, and he made a very interesting point, on which the right hon. Gentleman may want to ponder. In response to Opposition criticism of reserve powers, the Minister said:

"My right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport has reserve powers, but, like reserve powers in other fields, they are for use only in the last resort."—[*Official Report*, 10 December 1962; Vol. 669, c. 54.]

That argument played well in 1962. We shall see how it plays in 1999.

Clause 1 gives effect to a manifesto commitment. It creates the Greater London authority. It is short, simple and straightforward. It is hugely important for the people of London, and I commend it to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

Membership of the Authority and the Assembly

Mr. Simon Hughes: I beg to move amendment No. 16, in clause 2, page 1, line 15, after 'of', insert 'Greater'.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 17, in clause 2, page 2, line 1, after 'the', insert 'Greater'.

Mr. Hughes: Although this will be a relatively short debate, it raises an issue about which people ask a very simple question. If we are setting up under the Greater London Authority Bill the Greater London authority, why do we not call the mayor the Greater London mayor and the assembly the Greater London assembly? That is not just a technical question. The logic behind the debate on clause 1 stand part was that we are creating unique, citywide Greater London government. But, there is an historical legacy of a problem of description and understanding.

I should like to put on the record that I was treated by the Lord Mayor of London to a very nice lunch. He invited members of all parties to the Mansion house following his election. We all happily responded and discussed matters with him.

Over recent years, the City of London has argued very strongly for its continuing existence. Over the past 10 years, I think that it has persuaded virtually all hon. Members that it is effectively a business district, like those in Melbourne, Sydney and the like, and that, although it is an anomalous local authority, it nevertheless ought to continue to exist. I and my hon. Friends accept that.

The City has accepted, however, that it must revamp its structures to create modernised city government. It has this very year presented to Parliament a Bill in order to do so, which we shall debate another time.

My hon. Friends and I want the Bill to go further than the City has proposed, although at least it will extend the franchise beyond the 5,000 people who live in the City and are registered to vote.

Just to show how anomalous the situation is—I shall not elaborate—I am entitled to vote in the City because I am still a member of the chambers in the Temple from which I practised as a barrister before I was elected. As a tenant of those chambers, which is outside the City and a separate microcosm of government, I can elect ward councillors who govern the Temple.

Mr. Raynsford: That is absurd.

Mr. Hughes: Indeed. Such an anomaly needs to be considered.

There are greater anomalies, too. Traditionally, although there has been no legal bar to women being promoted to the highest office, it has somehow not happened very often. There are other issues, such as recognising the right to participate of all who work in the City, from the big firms to the small traders—newsagents and so on.

4.45 pm

The City needs to reform its structures, which it has started to do. I pay tribute to the present leader of the City council, Judith Mayhew, and her predecessor, who with their colleagues have started that process.

If one went round the world and asked people about London, the pictures that would come to mind are not images of new Britannia and rule Britannia, but the old images. They include, I am happy to say, Tower bridge, half of which is in my constituency, and the Tower of London, St. Paul's cathedral, and the Lord Mayor of London.

London has two cities. One of the representatives of the other city is present in the Chamber with us—the City of Westminster, where we sit. It has been argued that London should have three cities, and that Southwark, the other great early part of London, should be recognised. I am serious about that, and I hope that before long Southwark will be given city status too.

However, those are local government cities. The Cities of London and of Westminster have lord mayors, whereas the rest of the boroughs, including Southwark at present, have mayors. If the office of Lord Mayor of London is to continue—the City has no reason to change that, and there would be no logic to doing so—there will obviously be confusion from next year between the Lord Mayor of London and the mayor of London.

Around the country, people do not usually know whether someone is a lord mayor or a mayor. The mayors of Southwark are often called lord mayors, but they are not. People do not remember which cities and local authorities have mayors, and which have lord mayors. We know that there is to be an election for a mayor in London. Why do we not call the new postholder the mayor of Greater London? That would avoid confusion with the Lord Mayor of London, who will continue to be elected by the City—by more modern democratic procedures, one hopes. The title that I propose for the new mayor would make it clear that that person spoke on behalf of Greater London.

As the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) observed, there will be a difference between the mayor of London, under my proposal, and the mayor of Paris, for example. The mayor of Paris is the mayor not of greater Paris, but of the inner part of Paris, whereas the new London mayor will be the mayor of the area covered by the Euro-region, the citywide area, the 33 local authorities of Greater London. It would be no bad thing to change the name, avoid confusion and give the office holder a correct job description.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): As the hon. Gentleman raised the matter of the City Corporation, I did not want to miss the opportunity of passing a message back. One way of avoiding confusion would be to abolish the City Corporation. The proposals for reform promoted by the City Corporation are so feeble that they require extensive redrafting before they will satisfy the House.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman properly raises two issues. The first is whether the City of London should be abolished as a local authority area. I have been persuaded that it should stay.

On the second point, I join the hon. Gentleman. I am not satisfied that the proposals represent a reform of the City structures that would make it a democratically elected local authority for a business district. The City has begun that process, but it has been timid, and I want it to be braver. I hope that when the House deals with the matter, we will say that and the City will accept it. We may have a battle to persuade the City to withdraw its proposals and produce others. I share the hon. Gentleman's view, and I hope that we can agree in future.

The logic of the amendments extends to the assembly. The Government rejoice in the fact that some members of the assembly will have constituency interests. The Minister for London and Construction rightly announced today that the Government have accepted the recommendations of the boundary commissioners. Had he announced that the Government had not accepted those recommendations, there would have been trouble. We shall return to the fact that the Bill gives great powers to the Secretary of State, including the power to draw the boundaries. We think that that power should be taken away from Secretaries of State and given to independent boundary commissions. There is a top-up list of members who will represent London as a whole, and the logic is that they represent Greater London, not simply part of London. Therefore, there is a strong case for the name to be changed so that they and the assembly have an accurate job description.

Sir Sydney Chapman: The hon. Gentleman referred to the Lord Mayors of the cities of London and Westminster. We are to create a mayor of London who, he says, should be called the mayor of Greater London. Is it not slightly demeaning that the mayor of this new, quasi-regional authority, representing the greatest city in the world, should have as its head, only a mayor, not a lord mayor?

Mr. Hughes: We are getting into an interesting constitutional corner here. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. In 1999, on the eve of a new millennium, to call people in high office lords all the time is a bit out-dated. We have moved on. I am serious

[Mr. Hughes]

about that. We need a less deferential society where the senior citizen, whether elected directly or indirectly, is the mayor. We should get rid of the word lord from the title of Lord Mayor, not just in London but around the country. We have an unusual conjunction. The cities of London and Westminster both have lord mayors, so the obvious way forward is to make this other person the mayor of Greater London.

My last point, which the hon. Gentleman or someone else might have intervened to make, is a technical, "I am cleverer than you", point. It could be argued that, as there is no London assembly, we do not need to call the assembly the Greater London assembly to differentiate it.

The Minister for London and Construction has no doubt been briefed to reply. *[Interruption.]* I understand that the Minister for Transport in London is to respond. I rejoice at the breadth and variety of the ministerial team, and the Whip, who will never be forgotten.

I should like the Minister to do what I have seen her do once before in the House, which is to stand up, put aside her briefing notes, speak from the heart and use her intellectual powers to respond to the proposition, the case for which is so overwhelming that I hope that she will accept it. I make it quietly, generously and, I hope, persuasively. Let us have a mayor of Greater London and a Greater London assembly, and leave the cities to have their lord mayors for us long as that title remains unreformed.

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): If I do not respond from my heart, it is not because the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has not played his usual emotive cards.

I join the hon. Gentleman, as do the Government, in welcoming the moves that the City is making in democratising its institutions. I am second to none in my admiration for Judith Mayhew, who is not only a remarkable woman but is doing a remarkably effective job where she is.

There may be confusion between the title of mayor of London and Lord Mayor of London for visitors to these islands. It has been my experience that, when such visitors refer to the Lord Mayor of London, they inevitably presuppose that his name is Dick Whittington and that he is accompanied everywhere that he goes by a black cat.

Inasmuch as the Lord Mayor presents a glorious figurehead, there is an enormous benefit to the City of London. We are none of us in any doubt about the importance of the City of London, as one of the most dynamic financial centres in the world, to the economy of these islands. But there is no relationship whatever between the job of lord mayor and what we are proposing by way of a directly elected mayor and a directly elected assembly for London.

I was somewhat disappointed that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey harked back to previous debates. As my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction has already had occasion to say, ours is the only major capital city in the world that does not have an elected authority.

Our proposals—I am delighted to blight the hopes of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—were supported by a majority of those who voted in the referendum, in every London borough, including his own. They will provide the people of London with what we promised in our manifesto and what they voted for—a directly elected mayor of London and a London assembly.

We are in the process of modernising the government of the capital and giving power to the people of London, and they are most certainly not fools. They know what they voted for and what we mean by "mayor of London" and "London assembly"; they know what "London" means. They are not concerned with labels, but with whether the Greater London authority will improve London's transport, enhance the capital's prosperity and make London a safer, healthier place in which to work and live.

The people of London are also concerned about whether the GLA will have the powers to achieve those objectives. I do not believe that any useful purpose—

The Chairman: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but her arguments are going a little wide of the amendment, which is simply about the title of mayor. Her arguments seem to be more relevant to our previous debate.

Ms Jackson: I am grateful for your advice, Sir Alan.

Central to my argument is the belief that no purpose would be served by—indeed, there is no justification for—changing the titles of either the mayor of London or the London assembly. In the circumstances, I ask the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am afraid that I am not entirely happy with the Minister's response and therefore stress again the importance of amendments Nos. 16 and 17. As well as clarifying the difference between mayor and lord mayor, the amendments would ensure that there is no doubt that the mayor and the assembly will represent not only the interests of inner-city areas, but suburban London boroughs and suburban London constituencies such as mine.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) may not want his constituency to be part of a Greater London construct; I want my constituency to be part of that, and so do my constituents. A few weeks ago, I conducted a survey of rail commuters in the constituency. My constituents commute in their thousands up to Victoria or London Bridge stations and they want the mayor and the assembly to take as much account of their transport and other needs as the needs of residents in inner-city areas such as Southwark or Islington.

Making it crystal clear that the mayor is the mayor of Greater London and the London assembly is the Greater London assembly would reassure my constituents that their interests will not be forgotten and that their concerns—about deteriorating train services, for example—will not be sidelined by other, equally pressing, inner-city problems. I hope, therefore, that the Minister will consider the amendments a little more favourably.

Ms Jackson: I am somewhat surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not seem to be aware that the Greater London authority will comprise the mayor and the

London assembly. I do not believe that the people of London are incapable of understanding what is meant by "mayor of London" or "the assembly". His fear that the concerns of his constituents, or those of the constituents of any hon. Member representing a London constituency, will be sidelined has been answered by our proposals in respect of the constituencies. The constituencies will have directly elected representatives and the parties' percentage of the vote will be reflected in the 11 members who will be elected to the assembly by the list system.

I return the point that I made earlier, and I am sorry that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) did not afford it the weight that it carries: the people of London are not fools. They have been actively campaigning for the type of government which we made it abundantly clear we would give them. Hopefully, we are in the process of delivering that. They are not confused about what is meant by the "mayor of London" or the "assembly". I trust that, having heard me repeat it, the hon. Gentleman will agree with my previous request to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey that the amendment be withdrawn.

5 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: It was worth raising this issue, and I heard what the Minister said in both her brief answers. There is no confusion at the moment because those people do not yet exist. They will exist only from May next year. From that date, a lord mayor may be visiting one country while the mayor of London visits another.

I understand that the Government have drafted the Bill and do not want to concede this point, and I was not expecting an immediate concession. I am generous and understand how these things work, so I shall allow the Government time to reflect on this matter.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman will have to wait a long time.

Mr. Hughes: That was a provocative remark. The Labour party is often slow to reach the right decision. I have learnt that over many years. I have waited a long time for realisation about the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and constitutional reform. We know that with Labour we wait a long time. People in the health service are waiting a long time, too. I shall not stray too far from the subject, Sir Alan, but the Minister tempted me to do so.

I hope that the Government will reflect on this matter in the time that it takes us to complete the Committee stage. We may return to it later, but in the interim I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Ottaway: I beg to move amendment No. 60, in clause 2, page 1, line 15, at end insert—

'(aa) the Deputy Mayor'.

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 61, in clause 2, page 2, line 13, after 'Mayor', insert ', the Deputy Mayor'.

No. 62, in clause 2, page 2, line 15, after 'Mayor', insert ', the Deputy Mayor'.

No. 63, in clause 2, page 2, line 20, after 'Mayor', insert 'and Deputy Mayor'.

No. 64, in clause 2, page 2, line 23, after 'Mayor', insert ', the Deputy Mayor'.

Mr. Ottaway: It is important that the role of deputy mayor be more clearly defined and that it be independent of the assembly. The deputy mayor should not be a member of the assembly and a running mate of the mayor, elected on the same ticket. Clause 41 makes it clear that the deputy mayor has a significant role to play in the life of the authority, and that is repeated throughout the Bill. The Bill provides that he or she will be appointed by the mayor from the ranks of the assembly. That muddies the waters.

One of the more interesting experiments being conducted under the Bill is that, for the first time in the United Kingdom, the powers of the Executive are separated from those of the legislature. That is a huge change in our constitution and a principle that deserves the closest possible scrutiny. The separation of powers must be a true separation and be properly defined.

Elections will take place and party candidates for the assembly will campaign on their own manifesto, which may differ in many respects from that of the mayor. The mayor will have his mandate and policies, and the power to implement them. The assembly's role is to scrutinise the exercise of that power and, to the limited extent permitted under the Bill, to support the mayor or exercise a check on matters with which it disagrees. Those checks and balances are an essential ingredient of the separation of powers.

We, and constitutionists throughout the country, will watch closely to see how the division of power works. We shall want to see whether such a model may be more widely introduced. It is extremely important for that reason alone. However, the provisions of clause 41—that the deputy mayor will be chosen from the ranks of the assembly—muddy the water and put the deputy mayor in a position of fundamental conflict. On the one hand, he will be obliged to scrutinise the mayor's activities and, on the other, he will be expected to be loyal to the mayor in the performance of his executive powers. He cannot be expected to perform an executive function while turning around and assessing or commenting on his own performance.

I anticipate that the Minister will say that the position of deputy mayor will be no different from his position as a Minister in the House of Commons. However, there is all the difference in the world. The Minister's boss is the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister appoints him, and he reports to the Prime Minister through his Secretary of State. The Minister was elected on the same manifesto as the Prime Minister. His mandate is no lesser or greater than the Prime Minister's, and the Prime Minister derives his authority not only from his party, but from the House. Under the strict constitutional definition of the post of Prime Minister, he is the man who can command a majority in the House of Commons.

The mayor of London will have his own mandate and his own executive powers, and he will derive no authority from the assembly. The very point of the assembly is to keep the mayor in check and to scrutinise the mayor, so the potential for conflict is clear. It is not possible to straddle the gap between the two. The power to appoint

[Mr. Ottaway]

the deputy mayor from the assembly gives the mayor unacceptable patronage. Every member of the ruling coalition will know that the deputy mayor can be sacked at the mayor's whim, and any one of them could take his place. In an assembly in which only 13 votes make up a majority, it would be pretty easy to keep those members in line, because they would live in hope of becoming deputy mayor.

Our second reason for opposing the Government's proposals is that, as the deputy mayor will perform many of the mayor's functions, the public should know at the time of the election who the deputy mayor will be. We believe that he should run on a joint ticket with the candidate for mayor, so that it would be clear to all voters who he is, what his background is and what skills he would bring to the job. That would make the process clear, transparent and accountable.

That leads me to my third point. Our amendments would enable a business man to bring his commercial skills to the authority. Much has been made of the possibility of a business man running for the post of mayor. I have spoken to a number of business men about that in the past six months, but most of them shy away from the suggestion. The reason is clear. Believe it or not, to be a politician requires certain skills. They are not normal skills associated with normal behaviour, and some people find them easier than others. Such people are rarely business men. Many politicians have no business skills. We propose a formula that would allow an experienced politician to run as mayor with a business man as his deputy. There may be other combinations, but that would be a sensible package for any party to put forward. They would complement each other in a way that would benefit the authority and London as a whole.

There are two lesser reasons for the separation of roles, which are none the less relevant. First, members of the assembly will be busy enough without one of them having to take on the extra duties of deputy mayor. Pressures on the mayor and his deputy will be substantial. The deputy mayor will have little time to perform his role as an assembly man as well. Secondly, under our proposals, in the event of the mayor's incapacity, the deputy mayor would become the mayor, having already been endorsed by the public. To us, that is a particularly important point.

When the new authority is established, the pressure on the mayor and the mayor's office will be enormous. The Government are falling into the trap of making Londoners believe that the mayor will be the be-all and end-all of their problems. The pressure on him will be substantial, and the role of deputy mayor will be equally important. He will be a buffer, a voice, a wielder of executive power, and he should be independent of those whose job it is to scrutinise his role.

Those who have thought about how the mayor will operate will realise that there is merit in the amendments. I urge the Government to give them serious consideration.

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): The previous speech—although it came from a representative of all the forces of evil and darkness in our society—had a lot of merit. It was consistent and coherent. The Government are importing to Britain an American style of government, with the separation of the legislature and the Executive. In America, the President and Vice-President run as a team, and there are real advantages for my party in listening to that argument.

Given the nature of the way in which this place operates, we will not be told tonight that the amendment can be accepted. However, as the Bill is debated here and in another place over the next few months, there is every possibility that my party could be persuaded to see the strong advantages in the Conservative proposals.

In the first place, it would be wholly wrong for someone to run as mayor without saying whom they intend to appoint as deputy. Suppose I were to run as a new Labour candidate, opposed to tax-and-spend and in favour of bombing Iraq—all the normal package. If, having been elected mayor—if that were possible on such a slate—I appointed as my deputy some horrendous old Labour candidate, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), people would feel cheated. At the very least, every party should make clear who the deputy will be.

The deputy's position will be one of power and influence. The Bill implies clearly that the deputy mayor will chair the police authority—although that is not 100 per cent. certain—and that is a major and important public role. No one should have to cast a vote without being absolutely clear whom the mayor intends to appoint as deputy. It would be bizarre if an American President were elected and announced afterwards that he was appointing someone about whom the public were completely in the dark.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): If memory serves me correctly, the hon. Gentleman became leader of the Greater London council without the people of London knowing that he would become the leader.

Mr. Livingstone: If the hon. Gentleman had been around in London at the time, he would know that the *Evening Standard* made clear what was to happen virtually every day throughout the election campaign. On the day before the election, an entire front page editorial said that, if you vote Labour, you will get Ken Livingstone. Everyone then expressed surprise when that wonderful event came to pass. As far as I recall, the only Londoner who was surprised was Andrew McIntosh.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): The noble Lord.

Mr. Livingstone: Indeed.

Under the present proposal, we could have a bizarre situation. If the mayor were to die in office, or resign, the deputy mayor would take over and, within six months, an election would be held to fill the post permanently. However, if that death occurred 18 months before the general election, a fairly lengthy selection and election process would be followed almost immediately by the normal four-yearly election. Therefore, asking Londoners to vote for a ticket—a mayor and a deputy—knowing that, if the mayor is incapacitated, they will get the deputy, seems to be eminently more sensible.

When the Conservative party announced the proposal, I heard on the radio my party's initial reaction, which was to say that the proposal could not work because the deputy might get more votes than the mayor. Clearly, if two different votes were cast, that could be possible—but that

is not a sensible approach. There should be one vote and, on the ballot paper, there should be the name of the mayor and the mayor's chosen deputy.

During the American presidential election of 1800, the vice-presidential candidate, Aaron Burr, received the same number of electoral college votes as Thomas Jefferson, and the issue had to be resolved in the House of Representatives. However, we can learn from that experience, and run—as the Americans have done ever since 1800—a joint slate of two names.

As the Bill is considered, we must look at the role of the deputy mayor. That matter will come up in later amendments, but there could be a problem if the mayor nominated the deputy mayor to be a member of the police authority with the understanding that he was to become chair. Unless the mayor can make that appointment, the members of the police authority, not elected by Londoners but appointed by the Home Secretary, could conspire to prevent it from happening. We must ensure that a powerful deputy mayor has a powerful role. There should be a clear understanding, even if it is not put into the Bill, that the deputy mayor should be the chairman of the police committee.

5.15 pm

There would be a danger of members of the assembly keeping their nose clean with the mayor if there was the slightest possibility of their being chosen as deputy. Those of us with long experience in local government will know of many instances in which people have voted loyally for the party line, year after year, never dissenting, and have been rewarded with a year as mayor, with the allowance, drinks cupboard, nice meals and visits that go with the post. That certainly happened in Lambeth in the late 1960s when I was a discordant voice in the Labour party ranks.

The deputy mayor should be directly elected, not appointed from among assembly members. I am in agreement with almost all that has been said in support of the amendment, and I hope that my party will not reject it out of hand. Nothing undermines respect for politicians more than a knee-jerk rejection against an idea simply because it has come from our opponents.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We, too, are grateful to the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) for initiating this debate. Like the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), I will not offer a knee-jerk reaction.

Let me remind the Committee of the history of the proposals so far.

Mr. Pound: Oh, no.

Mr. Hughes: The history will be brief but instructive.

We started with no proposal for a deputy mayor. We, among others, sought to persuade the Government that it was important to have a deputy mayor, not least because the mayor could disappear, through death or other peradventure. We proposed, and still propose, that, because we cannot get what we most want—to have the mayor, as the leader of London politics, elected from the assembly, just as, in a slight variation because of the involvement of the monarch, Parliament allows the Prime Minister to be appointed—the deputy mayor should be chosen from among the assembly.

After some distillation in the Government machine, a counter-proposal was made to have a deputy mayor appointed by the mayor. That is progress, because we get a deputy, but it has the defect illustrated by the hon. Member for Brent, East: it is a patronage job. On the day after the election, the mayor looks round and decides, possibly without any prior notice to anybody, who will be the deputy. There is no suggestion that the mayor and deputy might reflect the balance of political view of the assembly, no guarantee that a female mayor would have a male deputy, to reflect London's gender balance, and no obligation to reflect London's ethnic mix.

The mayor might choose a best buddy as deputy. Some long-past political favour might be paid off. That is bad news, for the reason given by the hon. Members for Brent, East and for Croydon, South: the deputy is one step away from being the mayor. Who knows how long the mayor might survive, either politically or personally? The mayor might drop dead the day after election.

For however long or short a period, the deputy will have to carry out the functions of mayor, as well as having the important job of deputy while the mayor is still in post. He or she will deputise on a regular basis, and, with a small authority of only 25 members, there will be a lot of work for the mayor's office. It will be an important job, and we should think about how to fill it.

The Liberal Democrats cannot, without further development of the idea, support the proposal that a deputy should simply be elected on a single slate without any qualification. However, I accept that that proposal is a perfectly logical alternative, and the case has been put that a political mayor might have a non-political deputy. The reverse could arguably occur: in a press article some months ago, the Prime Minister said that he would like a business person to be mayor, and, if someone is plucked from the ranks of Labour supporters to fill the candidacy—just as Labour has plucked business people for other jobs—we could have a politician as deputy mayor.

There are flaws in the Conservative argument. To have two people elected on the same slate means a bit of a closed list. When the press spin on the Tory suggestion of electing a deputy at the same time as the mayor was first published, there was a hint that the deputy might not come from the same party as the mayor. There could be a mixed slate of—to pull an example from thin air—Lord Archer as the Tory mayoral candidate and the hon. Member for Brent, East as the candidate for deputy mayor. I do not think that any such deal has been struck, but who knows what might happen later in the campaign. We are not against that.

Mr. Livingstone: I am.

Mr. Hughes: I mean the idea, not the package: I should not want to tie the hon. Member for Brent, East to the idea that that was the dream team for any of us.

The idea of having a mayor and a deputy from different parties, or even of having one or other from no party at all, is rather appealing, and it is one of the prospects opened up by the new authority. It would be better, however, to advance as we propose, even if the Government do not go as far as the hon. Member for Croydon, South has proposed. On the day after the elections, it would be far better for the assembly to choose

[Mr. Hughes]

who would provide an appropriate balance to the mayor than to have the choice preordained either by a deal struck before the election or by a secret deal revealed by the mayor after the election with a fanfare of trumpets.

If, for the sake of argument, Labour, which got the largest share of the vote at the last general election, wins the first mayoral election, and if the deputy is chosen from the assembly, which will probably be balanced with no party having an overall majority, it may be in the interests of the government of the whole of London not to have a deputy mayor who is Labour. A Conservative, Liberal Democrat, independent or even Green deputy mayor could help us to make London government look as if it represents all the people. One way in which to do that is not to offer London a government for five years in which the mayor, deputy and everything else will be Labour, but to offer something more pluralist. London is not a one-party state; indeed, no party has a majority since, as I got the Minister to concede some months ago, Labour did not even quite win a majority at the last elections in London. In the words of one of our previous leaders, "We're all minorities now," although some are larger than others.

The Government have been very good about wanting a pluralist, representative assembly for London. It should be representative of gender, age, background and ethnicity. It should feel like and look like a government for London, unlike Westminster, which does not feel like an assembly representative of Britain: although it is getting better, we are not there yet.

In another guise, Sir Alan, you are one of three Deputy Speakers. There is an argument for having more than one deputy mayor, and I ask colleagues to consider that. If we have only one deputy mayor, the job will be subject to the sort of political scurrying that the hon. Member for Brent, East described. The deputy mayor will be one step away from being the mayor. Given that we cannot have what the Liberal Democrats would prefer, which is the mayor being chosen from among the assembly, having two or three deputies would give a better political spread—one from each of the groupings that we would expect to be in the assembly—and the leadership of London would be more pluralistic.

Finally, I hope that the Government will reflect on the benefit of responding to the Conservative proposition, which is supported by the hon. Member for Brent, East, and will consider how we can best get such a mixed ticket. The danger of the current system is that there is no opportunity for a running mate. The mayoral candidate might be driven by the politics of the next 12 to 15 months to declare who will be his or her running mate, as deputy, but would have to presume that the electorate would vote in the proposed running mate, and none of us should presume that. The deputy has to come from the assembly and, although there is a list system and one can make various assumptions about the people at the top of the list, one should not assume that X or Y will be in the assembly. We need to consider all the associated issues.

I join the hon. Member for Brent, East in hoping that the Minister will not reject such a proposition out of hand. Above all, I hope that he will not reiterate the argument, which appears to be based on a misconception about what is proposed, that the deputy mayor might get more votes—I never realised that that happened in America in 1800, but I do not remember studying that period in history. My understanding of the proposition was that it would be a package and that we would vote for the two—the two names would appear on the ballot paper together and would therefore have the same number of votes. It is not a question of the deputy getting more than the mayor; it is one package, two people.

I hope that the Minister will be generous and will at least open up the debate. Above all, the Liberal Democrats hope that, at the end of the further consideration, the Government will move 100 per cent. They have moved 50 per cent. of the way by conceding a deputy mayor, but have stopped at allowing him or her to be appointed by the mayor. If they move 100 per cent., so that the assembly chooses the deputy mayor, those whom the wider electorate of London have elected to represent the city will have a say in its leadership. Therefore, the leadership base will not be as narrow as it would be with only a directly elected mayor and the person whom she or he appoints.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): At the risk of being as pedantic as the Liberal Democrats, let me say that I am confused by the amendments, not least because of the use of the comma. Amendments Nos. 60, 61, 62 and 64 all refer to "', the Deputy Mayor'", whereas, given the introduction of the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) to amendment No. 63, they should read, "'and Deputy Mayor'".

The words, "mayor and deputy mayor" would lend themselves to the system described thus far, which would be run according to one ticket with two people on it—the mayor and the deputy mayor. However, the amendments would insert a comma and not an "and". To my tiny mind that suggests that there would be an election for the mayor, for the deputy mayor and so forth. I then run into difficulty because amendments Nos. 62 to 64 do not elaborate on what the election of the deputy mayor would entail.

We are considering four or five amendments that would insert "', the Deputy Mayor'", but do not suggest how he or she would be elected. That wording would merely add in the notion of a deputy mayor—as though one could suddenly drop out of the sky. Under the amendments, there would be no election for the deputy mayor; while the election of the mayor and candidates is detailed in schedule 2, references to the deputy mayor stop at clause 2. Perhaps the hon. Member for Croydon, South will pick that up.

5.30 pm

As the amendment stands, we would have a sort of an unelected deputy mayor paratrooper—not elected on a ticket, not remotely associated with the assembly, the mayor's office or anything else—who falls from the sky. In the worst analysis, Lord Archer could be elected and say, for example,"I'll have Monica Coghlan as my deputy." Who knows? No election is suggested, so anything could happen. That may reflect my technical ignorance in not understanding the amendments but I suspect that I am right.

More generally, I want to scotch a notion. Here, and upstairs, things are lovely, convivial and consensual, and we all say that points are fair or legitimate. I want to scotch the idea that, given that we started from a point

way before the general election, the notion of a deputy mayor, whether or elected or not, is new and that the Conservatives in London, perish the thought, have lit upon this wonderful, novel idea. Hon. Members may say, "Let's not be hasty and throw it away immediately, let's be consensual and think about it because no one has thought of it before", but that is rubbish. Since the inception of the notion of a mayor, the question of whether there should be a deputy mayor and whether the post should be elected, appointed by patronage or whatever, has been discussed in our ranks and in everyone else's. The thought that the Conservatives could be novel enough to think of having a deputy mayor is rubbish. Hon. Members may plead with us not to throw out the amendments but that is abject nonsense.

Not every mayoral—as opposed to presidential—contest, in the United States involves a deputy mayor. Many United States cities have no deputy mayor. In others, one of the council members, in the narrow sense that they have council members, is nominally appointed deputy mayor and carries out mayoral functions as we understand them in London boroughs. It is not strictly an executive position. I strongly urge that we get rid of this proposal here and now without any consensual faffing. If it comes back in any shape or form we should get rid of it then, too.

As I said on Second Reading of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, the points made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) about gender and ethnicity cannot be fully legislated for. They are, and remain, the responsibility of political parties. Points such as the balance of the ticket—when the mayor is a female, perhaps the deputy mayor should be male—should not be picked up in legislation. I do not dismiss those points, but they are the responsibility of political parties. The linkage between the deputy mayor and the mayor is designed, as I now understand it, precisely to provide the crucial link between the mayor and assembly. The deputy mayor is not only a deputy but a link.

On having more than one deputy mayor, the Bill deals with the chair and deputy chair of the assembly and how they will fit in with the deputy mayor and mayor. That is also important but it will be discussed later.

Not least because of the way that the assembly will be elected, I do not accept the idea that was discussed on Second Reading that we will effectively have two hermetically sealed little units: a mayor going off in one direction doing whatever he or she wants and the assembly doing all that it can to stop him or her. We are talking about a brand new architecture of governance for London, and the mayor especially and the assembly had better understand that. If they think that it is all about smoke-filled rooms in Charles square, Walworth road, Millbank and wherever the minority parties live these days, they have another thing coming. Sooner rather than later, the mayor and the assembly will sit down and talk about consensual, practical, productive and realistic politics so that London can go forward. It is not about patronage or about reinventing Mayor Daley in Chicago, or any other horror stories of a mayor—I nearly said Morrison, but I did not mean that—but about a brand-new system for the millennium.

I would have difficulty—as would the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, I believe—if we stayed with the system set out in the Bill, because all the mayoral candidates could say, "I will have so-and-so as my deputy mayor". That would be extremely presumptive, whether it was the top Tory, the top Liberal or the top Labour person on the list, or the Labour person in the safest of the 14 directly elected seats. That should not happen and I agree with the hon. Gentleman about that. However, the deputy mayor should be put in place as soon as possible after the election for mayor. One would hope that the second time around, or in subsequent elections, if the team of mayor and deputy mayor had been successful on behalf of London, or if there were opposition incumbents, there might well be election tickets, as envisaged by the amendments.

The amendment is a pale, washed-out blue herring, rather than a red herring—nevertheless, still a herring—and should be totally resisted. If we fully understand the new architecture of the governance of London as set out in the Bill, we see the amendment for what it is: purely and simply, a wrecking amendment, tabled by the hon. Member for Croydon, South, whether his constituency is in Kent, Surrey or Greater London.

Sir Sydney Chapman: At one point in our short debate, I felt descending on me the emotion of an unholy alliance across the Chamber. I can only say to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) that I am always grateful for his interventions on this issue, because he brings a historical perspective to it. On Second Reading, he reminded us that it was the wicked but great Lord Salisbury who tried to remove the old London county council after it had been in existence for 10 years.

I am also pleased to follow the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) and later I shall refer to one of the points that he made. I can be brief because my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) has articulated many of my feelings about why the amendment should be accepted. I believe that there will be a conflict of interest if the deputy mayor, who is to be appointed solely by the mayor, is a member of the assembly.

My point is a simple one, and it is one that the Government seem to have recognised, because clause 41—I hope that I am not trespassing too far beyond clause 2—states that the mayor cannot appoint a deputy mayor who is the chairman of the assembly. I prefer to say chairman rather than chair, not only because I am old-fashioned and believe that the man embraces the woman, etymologically, but because my surname is Chapman and not Chap. The point is that the mayor cannot appoint the chairman of the assembly as deputy mayor, or rather, that he can, but, if he were to do so, the chairman would have to resign as chairman of the assembly. The remarks of the hon. Member for Harrow, East reminded me that it is not only one person from the assembly who cannot be the deputy mayor, but two people, because the deputy chairman of the assembly cannot remain in that position if he is appointed deputy mayor.

That makes a fairly wide invasion into, even if it does not drive a coach and horses through, the concept that was powerfully argued by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South and the hon. Member for Brent, East. Will the Government consider the matter seriously? On balance, I believe that it is a good idea that the deputy

[Sir Sydney Chapman]

mayor should be elected on the ticket for the mayoral election, rather than be appointed by the mayor from the elected members of the assembly.

Mr. Pound: There are moments in my albeit very short—and not likely to be extremely long—life in this place when, against my every instinct, I feel a scintilla of sympathy for the views expressed by the Liberal Democrats. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) occasionally makes a persuasive point. Today, he described a scenario in which the mayor was surrounded by a glittering constellation of deputy mayors, each and every one of whom represented another strand of Londoners. They were gathered almost inevitably in the millennium dome—because that is sure as hell the only place big enough to take them—and somehow they melded together in the interests of Londoners. That is despite the fact that an hour ago we were arguing about just where London is. If I have learned anything, it is that Bromley is clearly not in London—which is not a suggestion with which I have a great deal of trouble.

Unfortunately, listening to the argument that a thousand flowers will bloom and we will somehow link together, I was reminded—as I am sure were many other hon. Members—of the words of Ernest Bevin. He was an extremely wise and distinguished statesperson who once said, "If we had a little less democracy and a little more trust, we would get a lot more done." He was talking about what he described as "our great movement" that used to exist a few years ago.

We are talking about not some idealised internet scenario of the perfect, most democratic and most agonisingly painful representative voting system that ever existed in the solar system, but a practical system that will meet the needs of Londoners and our capital city. We are talking essentially about having a body that is smaller than the GLC, not about quadrupling its size and having sub-mayors from all over the place. I was a mayor of the London borough of Ealing—it is a period of Ealing civic history that is, oddly enough, seldom referred to in the history of that borough. However, I remember that period with great nostalgia—and not through a haze, it must be said. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) seemed to reduce the deputy mayoral issue to scrabbling for the keys of the drinks cupboard.

We have three propositions before us that are plainly wrong. They are advanced by the two Opposition parties and, with the greatest respect, by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East. The reality is that Londoners have waited far too damn long and we cannot endure more of these pettifogging, pusillanimous discussions about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin when there is work to be done. Our streets are choked with traffic and we must come to grips with many problems involving London's housing and environment. We have more important things to do than trying to work out the Southwark, North and Bermondsey model of ultimate democratic representation. It is simply not a valid use of our time.

I return to a point that I made earlier. Everybody accepts that we are talking about a different form of governance for this city. Nobody wants to recreate the London county council or the GLC. No one—with respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty)—is talking about replicating Chicago of the 1950s. We are talking about a 21st century model for a 21st century city. That model will, by definition, be different. Let us judge the proposals tonight not by referring back but by looking forward to a slimline, tighter, more accountable and more controlled authority that will achieve for London. It is nonsense to suggest that having two elections for mayor and deputy mayor will further that objective. I suggest that that idea owes more to the Conservative party's need to accommodate internal strands of interest than to any attempt to reach a democratic conclusion.

Mr. Forth: For the avoidance of doubt—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman did not intend to imply this—I hope that he is not suggesting that we should abandon the entire Committee proceedings and legislative process because it is absurd to examine the details of the Bill and discuss possible changes to it. If he is, he appears to be falling into step with his leadership which has exactly that wish and which wants to do away with the legislative process in the House of Commons. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reassure us in this early stage in the Committee's proceedings that he will allow us occasionally to discuss details of the Bill—and maybe even seek to amend it.

5.45 pm

Mr. Pound: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I assure you that that was not my intention, Sir Alan. We have before us a Bill of 277 clauses which deals with some of the most important aspects that will affect our lives as Londoners and those of our descendants. I want to discuss environmental issues such as biodiversity, transportation and housing—

The Chairman: Order. We have before us an amendment about the deputy mayor and nothing else.

Mr. Pound: That is the point that I was making, Sir Alan. I am sorry, I was making it in my clumsy, naive way. There are issues that must be debated. My point is that since about half-past 3 we have spent the time and much energy discussing an issue that is not germane to the heart of the Bill for the reasons that I started to list, but I ran out of steam halfway through and you rightly called me to order, Sir Alan.

I have a great deal of sympathy for people who want to promulgate different views. That is their democratic right and their duty. However, on this issue, we are in grave danger of going down a blind alley in search of a mythical perfection. Such perfection possibly existed only in ancient Athens, and even then in fairly unpropitious social circumstances that we may not want to replicate. We are discussing practicalities, and for us to go into such detail about the deputy mayor seems an inordinate waste of time.

I support the Government's position, not as a toadying Back Bencher, but as someone who has been a councillor in London for 16 years, who has been involved in London politics for the best part of his working life and who seeks a system that works, perhaps not the ideal system, but one that is practical and manageable and which will deliver for this capital city.

Mrs. Lait: I am pleased to be able to support the proposition of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon,

South (Mr. Ottaway) for an elected deputy mayor. I hope that I do not blight the hopes of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) by coming from the side of darkness and saying that I thought he spoke a great deal of sense in his support for the amendment. We have also heard a couple of impassioned contributions about the current system.

Mr. McNulty: You began by referring—

The Chairman: Order. The hon. Gentleman has now been here long enough to know the correct forms of address.

Mr. McNulty: I apologise, Sir Alan, not least because you pulled me up on that yesterday.

The hon. Lady began by referring to an elected deputy mayor. Given the points that I made at the beginning of my speech, will she tell me where in the amendment there is a reference to the election of a deputy mayor and the details of that process, because I could not find such a reference?

Mrs. Lait: With the greatest respect, I have to say that the hon. Gentleman wasted the Committee's time by arguing about commas when we are discussing the principle of a directly elected deputy mayor. That measure would be a good way to reinforce the principle that Ministers are trying to support—the separation of the executive from the legislature. That is the sense in which I strongly support our amendment.

I am rather sad that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) let his wings of imagination take flight—the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) endorsed his point—and asked us to envisage hundreds of sub-mayors in the dome. We seek only one directly elected mayor.

I know that we are short of time, so without reiterating any of the points that have been made, I want to make a practical point about the drawback of having a deputy mayor chosen from among the assembly members. The deputy mayor might be chosen from among those members who will be directly elected by the boroughs. One hopes that they will have constituency work of the type that most councillors have to do. They will each be representing more than 300,000 people, so I suspect that they will have a reasonably sized postbag. It will take them time to deal with that correspondence, along with the work that the assembly will be doing.

The other option is to have a deputy mayor chosen from the list. That takes us back to the problem, which I shall not outline at great length—I should be pulled up if I did so—of the two types of elected members and their various powers and responsibilities and to the role of proportional representation in delivering people who are genuinely representative.

One assumes that the London members will not have the same postbags as the others and so will have more time. It is therefore almost a foregone conclusion that the deputy mayor will be chosen from among the London members. Of course, the London members are, against the will of the Opposition, to be chosen by the parties. That means that the deputy mayor will have a great conflict of interest if the assembly is, for some reason, in dispute with the mayor or if the assembly and/or the mayor is in dispute with the Government. Whoever is elected as a Labour London member will certainly be chosen by the party and will hence be approved by the Government. I would not wish to have the job of that deputy mayor.

The suggestion that there should be a directly elected deputy mayor gets around all of the problems inherent in having a deputy mayor who is chosen. I do not wish to stand for the assembly, but I would never take on the job of deputy mayor as set out in the Bill.

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): We shall of course debate the role of the deputy mayor when clause 41 is considered, but I oppose the amendment because it would affect the balance between the mayor and the assembly. The mayor will have a very powerful role, as set out in the Bill, and a ticket involving a mayor and a deputy would strengthen his powers dramatically. The assembly's role in checking those powers would inevitably be diminished by the amendment. It is important that there is a balance in the elections of the deputy mayor and of the assembly. Our job is to beef up the role of assembly members so that there is not too much power in the hands of the mayor. I urge the Committee to reject the amendment.

Mr. Edward Davey: While listening to the hon. Members for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) and for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), I began to wonder whether they realised why they had been returned to this place. Parliament is meant to be about debate and discussing ideas. The hon. Member for Harrow, East suggested that we should not keep an open mind or think again during our proceedings. That seems to be wholly against the idea of parliamentary democracy. We and the Government should have an open mind. The hon. Gentlemen suggested that that meant being overly consensual. However, the Government state in the Green Paper that they want consensual government for London, so he is a little off message.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North seems to want government by diktat. He does not want us to debate how democracy in London should work. The very essence of the Bill is the setting up of government for London, and the structure of that government is clearly important. I am surprised and rather shocked by the hon. Gentleman.

Two arguments have been put forward by the hon. Members for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) as to why there should be a deputy mayor running on a ticket with the mayor. The hon. Member for Croydon, South suggested that it would enable the position to be given to a business person. However, it does not necessarily follow that a business person would take up the post.

The notion that a business person who stands for elected office is different and not involved in politics has been debated in the London press and in the House, but it is devoid of logic. One reason that business people are not coming forward is that they do not want to get involved in politics. The idea that someone standing for office can be neutral and above politics is arrant nonsense. If a business man wants to become a politician, he should say so openly, not try to hide behind a neutral facade and pretend that he has nothing to do with the dirty business of politics. We should be proud of our profession, not try to sell it down the river by saying that we should have a business person who knows how to run things because we do not. Saying that shows a lack of confidence in our profession.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

The other argument, deployed by the hon. Member for Brent, East, was the heartbeat argument. The argument, which we hear in relation to the constitution of the United States of America, is that the post of Vice-President is important and that the Vice-President should run on a ticket with the President—if the President dies, there needs to be an immediate exchange of power into the hands of another leader of the Executive.

I know that the Greater London authority is an important authority. We support it and believe that it will bring democracy to London, but I am afraid that a parallel with the role of the Vice-President of the United States does not apply. The President of the United States is rather more important than the future mayor of London, not least because he has his finger on the button. In the United States, the immediate transition of power is more necessary, and it makes more sense to have a double ticket in those circumstances.

As the hon. Member for Harrow, East said in one of his more relevant remarks, in other American cities which have a mayor, it is rare for there to be double-ticket elections.

Mr. Randall: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that for the Liberal Democrats, one of the benefits of a joint ticket is that it would enable them—as they like to do all over the country—to have two candidates expressing different views?

Mr. Davey: I am usually a fond admirer of the hon. Gentleman's contributions, but that was not worthy of him.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am almost tempted to pick up on the intervention of the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), but I dare not do so. I want to pick up on the American example before my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) leaves the subject. The other obvious difference is that in the United States if the Vice-President takes over, he remains in office for the remainder of the four-year presidential term. Here, if the mayor were to die or resign, there would, rightly, be a by-election, unless it were at the end of a term. It is not a true parallel, in that sense, either.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. He makes the point as succinctly and perceptively as usual.

There are comparisons to be made with mayoral systems outside the United States. The Liberal Democrats look not only to Europe and America, but to Japan. There, the deputy mayor is effectively appointed by the mayor, but has to be approved by the council, which is a half-way house between our position and that of the Government as set out in the Bill. In Germany, a burgermeister does not appoint his deputy. The local council has to elect the deputy, who often comes from the opposition party, in an attempt to achieve the consensual politics that the Government say that they want, but which the hon. Member for Harrow, East clearly does not.

The business man and heartbeat arguments for a deputy mayor do not stand up. Unlike the hon. Member for Harrow, East, I like to keep an open mind. Let us have a more detailed debate on the deputy mayor when we consider clause 41. If the hon. Member for Croydon, South can deploy some more arguments, I shall be happy to listen to them but, for the moment, I am unconvinced.

6 pm

Mr. Raynsford: Curiously, I shall start by agreeing with the opening proposition of the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway). He rightly highlighted the fact that we were creating a new structure of government, which for the first time introduces to this country the concept of the separation of powers. He rightly stressed that we should carefully consider its implications.

We agree whole-heartedly. That innovation is important. We believe that it will be usefully extended in the local government sphere, where we are exploring new models which will achieve a separation between the executive and scrutiny functions. We want to ensure that, in our proposals for London, the new arrangement, with the separation of powers, ensures effective scrutiny and effective working.

We have considered models of mayoral government from countries worldwide, and I hope that we have learnt where problems may arise. In particular, we saw potential difficulties where models allowed deadlock, because mayor and assembly often found themselves in conflict, with no good conflict resolution procedures. Often, the government of a city could be brought to a halt—or in some cases there could be no budget—because there was no effective mechanism for overcoming such deadlock.

Equally, we wanted to avoid a position that can exist if one too rigidly applies the American system, based on the separation of powers, where the only role of the assembly—or council, as it is usually called in America—is to criticise and scrutinise: a remorselessly negative role, with no effective positive role. That can often produce a frame of mind in which the mayor and the council or assembly never work together constructively, because they see themselves as implacably opposed to one another. We do not believe that to be a good model, and we have sought to develop proposals that will ensure that there are real links between mayor and assembly. In the Government's proposal, the deputy mayor is a key figure in establishing that link.

The Conservative amendments are logical only if we accept other elements of the Conservative party's proposals—notably its proposal that the assembly should be not directly elected, but appointed by the boroughs. I readily agree that it would be nonsense to select a deputy mayor from an appointed chamber of that kind, but, as the hon. Member for Croydon, South knows, we are not minded to accept his party's proposal for an appointed assembly, and we do not intend to accept the proposal that a deputy mayor be elected on the same slate as the mayor. That, as far as we can understand it, is the Conservatives' intention.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) said, the amendments do not make it clear whether the deputy mayor would be elected on a joint ticket, or whether the electorate could in any way express a view about the merits of the deputy mayor as such. If the deputy mayor stands on a joint ticket and the electorate are presented with the proposition that they may choose, let us say, Archer and Norris, those who want one but not the other do not have a good choice. They may

be happy to elect one, but they may be appalled at the idea of the other. Far be it from me to suggest which might arouse enthusiasm or hostility; the point is that the electorate would have no say.

Last year, in a different context, Opposition Members criticised us for not posing more than one question in a referendum, and I shall defend, as I did then, our decision to do so. The context was different, because then we were setting a proposition for a structure of governance. In this case, the Opposition are proposing that two people should be elected, but apparently, if I get it right, the electorate will not be able to say, "We should like one, but not the other." That is a monstrous travesty of democracy.

It is essential that the deputy mayor is a member of the assembly, to provide a bridge between the two parts of the authority, and to ensure that they develop a shared sense of purpose, and work together in the interests of London as a whole. That is the structure that we have devised, because we are seeking to develop a system that will encourage constructive working relations and a more consensual approach, and avoid unnecessary conflict. That is why the mayor and assembly members have clearly defined and different roles, and why it is essential that they are elected to fulfil those roles instead of simply being appointed.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I hope that the Minister will address the issue that came up in two different ways in the debate. Why should not the deputy, as we have long proposed, be elected by the assembly or—as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) suggested, taking the Japanese model—be proposed by the mayor, but agreed by the assembly, as appointments to high office are agreed by Select Committees worldwide? That would be entirely compatible with the proposition that the Minister has just put to the Committee about the need for a bridge between assembly and mayor.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman will fully understand that there are many options. We have considered the options. Mayoral systems in different parts of the world have been studied, and I have described how we tried to come up with a system that we felt would work best in London. I accept that other models can work in different cities and might work here, too.

We happen to have formed a judgment that the right relationship is one in which there is a strong mayor, able to achieve results, and that, to help that process, the mayor should appoint the deputy mayor. Equally, however, we believe that the mayor must be accountable and must be subject to close scrutiny. Therefore we have put great emphasis on the relationships between mayor and assembly, ensuring accountability and close scrutiny.

I do not argue that the model that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) has proposed is intrinsically wrong; I just happen to believe that the model that we have proposed is right, and is compatible with the general architecture—to employ the term used by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone)—of the system of government that we have put in place.

Mr. Hughes: Does the Minister accept, however, that if his proposition is carried, it would be unfair and illogical—for reasons well put from the Labour Back Benches—for any mayoral candidate to announce before election day who would be their deputy? That would presume on the electorate's right to choose the assembly members and, therefore, the identity of the deputy would be unknown until the day after the election or later. The deputy could then be chosen for no reason other than a personal favour and preference by the person who was mayor. That is the most riddled with potential corruption of all the bits of the structure that the Minister is proposing to the Committee.

Mr. Raynsford: In a moment, I shall discuss the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised in his earlier speech about the possibility of problems of patronage. It is a serious issue, which we shall address. However, I point out, in relation to that latest intervention, that we do wish to leave a good measure of latitude to the mayor to appoint a person whom he or she feels is the appropriate person to fulfil that function.

One of the defined functions of the deputy mayor will be that of being a member of the Metropolitan police authority. Obviously, the mayor will have to think carefully about the qualifications of the person who will fulfil that very important link, not only in relation to the assembly, but in relation to the Metropolitan police authority. I consider it unlikely, unless the mayoral candidate is very confident indeed about the outcome of the election, that he or she would want to pre-empt the choice of deputy mayor by making an absolute declaration before an election.

Incidentally, I hope that we can, in these debates, acknowledge that a woman may be elected mayor. The assumption by some hon. Members that the mayor is bound to be a man is, to my mind, offensive. I am not referring to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who is entirely scrupulous and proper on these matters.

A mayoral candidate may wish to say who might possibly be the deputy, and that might provide a spur and give the electorate an incentive to return a candidate in one area; I suspect that such factors may well come into discussion. However, we are leaving that very much to the mayor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East, who a year ago, criticised our proposals, describing them as an inappropriate American import into this country, tonight took a very different viewpoint. He advocated that we should support the model proposed by the amendment, which resembles the American presidential—but not the American mayoral—model. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton argued well and effectively that the American President and Vice-President perform functions very different from those of American mayors. It is inappropriate to apply a presidential model to a mayoral system.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey raised the issue of patronage. He expressed concern that the mayor would be inclined to appoint people for inappropriate reasons. I do not believe that that will happen. The mayor will know that a good working relationship with the assembly will be crucial to the success of his or her administration. A deputy mayor who is—and is seen as—a figure of substance in the assembly, and who has influence and authority in it, will be essential to the good governance of London and to the success of the mayoralty. Inevitably, that will be a very important consideration in the mind of any mayor.

[Mr. Raynsford]

Our proposal allows scope for balance. Again, we would not want to pre-empt the mayor's decision, although, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and others have rightly said, we are looking for a framework of government that will be more inclusive, allowing more opportunities for the representation of groups that have not always been well represented in democratic institutions. Questions of balance will inevitably come into the equation when the mayor is making a decision. The important point is that the mayor must make that choice because he or she will have to work with the assembly, and the deputy mayor will provide a crucial link.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East rightly focused on the lack of clarity in the Opposition's position on how the deputy would be elected, and the contradiction obviously inherent in a joint slate, on which the electorate would not have the choice to express a preference for one of two candidates. The concept that we cannot have one without the other is somewhat curious. My hon. Friend also rightly emphasised how the Government's proposals involve putting into place a new architecture for the governance of London, in which the mayor and the assembly will work together and not be implacably opposed to each other.

Interesting contributions to the debate have also been made by the hon. Members for Chipping Barnet (Sir Sydney Chapman), for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), and for Kingston and Surbiton, to which I have already referred, and by my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), who spoke with his usual humour, and for Upminster (Mr. Darvill).

The Opposition have argued that, if the deputy mayor were an assembly member, the assembly's scrutiny role would be diminished. That is not so. The assembly will have clearly defined powers to call the mayor, the deputy mayor and their senior staff to account. The mayor will have to answer assembly questions and justify his or her actions with reasons. Other than the deputy mayor, no assembly member will have executive functions. The assembly's scrutiny role will not, therefore, be compromised.

It is essential that there is a strong link between the mayor and the assembly in the person of the deputy mayor, who is able both to articulate mayoral intentions to the assembly and transmit assembly opinions to the mayor. The assembly will be heard at the heart of the mayor's administration, and assembly concerns will be high profile.

The Opposition's position is extraordinary. We must not forget that, 20 months ago, they did not want a mayor at all; they were totally opposed to the idea. Now, they want not one but two—although they do not want an elected assembly, which makes a travesty of scrutiny. How can a non-elected body scrutinise an elected mayor and an elected deputy mayor? The elected mayor and deputy would be able to turn to the unelected assembly and say, "We, alone, have a mandate from the people of London. How dare you challenge our mandate?" That would create an imbalance, as a result of which scrutiny would not work successfully. It is essential that both the mayor and the assembly have a mandate because they are elected, and can therefore fulfil their role as elected representatives.

Constraints on the mayor are obviously considerable under our proposals. We want arrangements for proper scrutiny which will allow the mayor's actions to be constantly under review. That depends on an assembly that is able to fulfil such a function confidently.

Frankly, the Opposition's case is shaky—not least in the suggestion that it will allow good business people to participate in running the Greater London authority, when otherwise they would be discouraged from doing so. Why should a business person be more likely to stand if he or she had to run for office as deputy mayor rather than mayor—or, indeed, as a member of the assembly? That is a laughable proposition. Of course we would like good business people to come forward, but there is no basis on which they should be constrained to fulfil only the role of deputy mayor.

We have had an interesting debate, although it has not taken forward to any constructive degree the Opposition's view on how the new body in London will operate. We believe very passionately in a structure of government that will allow both accountability and effectiveness. Having an elected deputy mayor, elected on the same ticket as the mayor, will not achieve that purpose. It will, in many ways, compromise it and include serious disadvantages. I urge the hon. Member for Croydon, South to withdraw his amendment. If he does not, I urge my hon. Friends and other hon. Members to vote against it.

6.15 pm

Mr. Ottaway: At the heart of the amendment is the conflict of interest between the deputy mayor's capacity as an assembly man and his role as the voice of the mayor. The Minister has not addressed the issue properly or given a constructive and sensible response to the proposals. Under the circumstances, we therefore wish to divide the Committee.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 120, Noes 371.

Division No. 37] **[6.16 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John

Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lairig, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Oliver Heald.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Llwyd, Elfyn

Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Macteggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Rayneford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Storte, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Wookey, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): On a point of order, Mr. Lord. I am sorry to interrupt the House. For some days I have been trying to get a copy of "Urban Renaissance", a document produced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It is Lord Rogers's interim report and has been paid for by the taxpayer. It contains suggestions for urban renewal, many of which would interest both sides of the House, but neither side can get hold of it because the DETR has failed to provide any copies to the Vote Office. The DETR has held a press conference on the report and announced it to the public, but if one wants a copy, one must send someone to the DETR. Hon. Members cannot get copies.

Is it not time that the Government accepted that their first duty is to tell the House of their projects and programmes, and that the House should know about them before the press and the public? If we need such documents, we should be able to get them readily from the Vote Office.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael Lord): That is not a point of order for the Chair, but I am sure that the House will have heard and noted the right hon. Gentleman's point.

6.30 pm

Mr. Ottaway: I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 2, leave out lines 2 to 22 and insert—

'(2) The Assembly shall consist of 33 members comprising—

(a) one nominated representative from each London Borough and

(b) one nominated representative from the Corporation of London.

(3) The Mayor shall be returned in accordance with the provisions made in or by virtue of this Act for the holding of elections and the filling of a vacancy in the office of Mayor.'.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 82, in page 2, line 2, leave out 'consist of twenty five' and insert

', until the first boundary review under Schedule 1 consist of forty'.

No. 3, in page 2, line 2, leave out 'twenty five' and insert 'thirty–three'.

No. 18, in page 2, line 2, leave out 'twenty five' and insert 'forty'.

No. 4, in page 2, line 2, leave out from 'members' to end of line 6.

No. 20, in page 2, line 3, leave out 'fourteen' and insert 'twenty three'.

No. 21, in page 2, line 5, leave out 'eleven' and insert 'seventeen'.

No. 24, in page 2, line 10, at end insert

'following a review carried out by the Local Government Commission under the terms of Schedule 1 to this Act.'

No. 2, in page 2, leave out lines 34 to 39.

No. 72, in schedule 1, page 139, line 43, leave out from 'If' to second 'the' and insert

'Within 12 months of each ordinary election'.

No. 12, in page 141, line 25, leave out 'fourteen' and insert 'thirty–three'.

No. 28, in page 141, line 25, leave out 'fourteen' and insert 'twenty three'.

No. 13, in page 141, leave out lines 26 to 34 and insert—

'2. Each London borough shall be an assembly constituency'.

No. 57, in page 141, line 34, at end insert—

'6. If the population of any London borough either increases or decreases to such an extent that, in the opinion of the Local Government Commission, the strict interpretation of the rules would produce an unacceptably sized constituency, the Commission may vary the rules as it sees fit.'.

Mr. Ottaway: The amendment relates to the Opposition's proposal that the assembly of the authority should comprise borough representatives. We believe in a mayor who will speak for Londoners at a national level and for London on the international stage. The Bill shows signs of having tried to achieve that, but we have ended up with a rather lop-sided mayor.

The mayor has important powers vis-a-vis the boroughs. He can direct them on major planning matters, control their local transport and traffic arrangements, specify their waste disposal, recycling and pollution policies, and he, rather than the boroughs, will nominate the police authority members.

Far too much has been taken from the boroughs, particularly matters which are too operational in character—for example, taxicard and door-to-door transport, and highways management rather than just traffic management for the road network.

The Bill makes no provision for liaison or communication between the boroughs and the mayor. That is a glaring omission given that the boroughs will collectively spend approaching £15 billion and deliver all the basic services.

The Committee should bear in mind that the mayor and the assembly will comprise just 26 people. The delivery of all basic services will be through the London boroughs and the scope for negotiation and discussion with them is preciously thin.

As the Bill is structured, the assembly's role in all this is limited. As a result, the potential for a breakdown in the relationship between the authority and the London boroughs is substantial. Concerns are growing. To return to the quotes that I gave on Second Reading, the chief executive of Kensington and Chelsea said:

"I think the immediate things that make everybody's hair begin to rise are the road network, transportation and planning, where the potential for conflict is substantial."

Just to show that Kensington and Chelsea is not alone, the chief executive of Islington said:

"It's now about to dawn on everyone that the GLA is going to have a massive impact on the way the boroughs operate."

Mr. Gummer: In my hon. Friend's earlier examples of those areas which will be taken over, he mentioned the recycling of waste. I declare an interest in this, as the chairman of a company which recycles packaging. Is it not important to have that close connection which Agenda 21 has with each of the boroughs? What will it mean if a borough decides to take some far-sighted view? For example, Islington might well take a far-sighted view on new ideas for recycling. Would it then be constantly hampered and pressed by a mayor who has little connection with the interests of the Agenda 21 committee and the borough?

Mr. Ottaway: My right hon. Friend is right. As I said earlier, the boroughs know best what is necessary for them. If they do not have the voice and the representation within the authority, they will feel rejected, and the potential for clash and conflict will grow. It is the essence of the amendment that, if the assembly was made up of borough representatives, their recycling and waste disposal men and the Agenda 21 representatives could have their voice heard by the authority and the mayor. My right hon. Friend makes a valuable point.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): The hon. Gentleman said that the assembly would change the way in which boroughs operate. Councils all over London are giving planning permission to new out-of-town shopping developments which may well have an impact on neighbouring boroughs, and making other decisions which have an impact on their neighbours. Is it not about time that we changed the way in which boroughs operate and had a strategic overview which is not based on squabbling between neighbouring boroughs?

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman drifts into planning, which is just within the amendment's scope. If the borough of Croydon wanted to encourage a development by East Croydon station, but the mayor's vision was that that should be somewhere in north London, it will happen neither in Croydon nor in north London, where no one is promoting it in the first place. For the mayor to have the last word in planning policy is a barrier to planning development rather than the stimulus which the hon. Gentleman seems to expect.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): May I press my hon. Friend further on his excellent remarks? There is a lot of merit in what he says. However, as a former member of the GLC and a London borough, may I ask him how he will ensure, when borough representatives are elected to the GLA, that rather than think parochially they bear in mind the interests of London as a whole?

Mr. Ottaway: My hon. Friend was a distinguished member of the GLC. I recall, on occasions, hearing him speak in that august body. Let the Committee be in no doubt that my hon. Friend was most robust on behalf of the citizens of Richmond, of whom I happen to be one. He took a very parochial view, and that is what the elected members of the assembly will do. They will speak up for their constituents. The Minister said that he did not want that; that the assembly should think strategically. If he expects that, he misunderstands human nature.

I was making the point that there is growing concern that there will be clash and conflict between the boroughs and the authority. As I understand it, the Minister attended a meeting of the London borough leaders in December where exactly the same point was made to him.

[Mr. Ottaway]

The hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) is not with us today, but when he was leader of Merton council he said:

"I have been to cities in the US with a directly elected mayor and seen the distress it causes. The leader of the assembly and the mayor are continually fighting."

That is the very point that we are making tonight.

The famous *Evening Standard* survey of a little over a year ago showed that 10 out of 19 town hall Labour leaders were opposed to the Government's proposals. It said:

"Only five of the 19 Labour council leaders gave their enthusiastic backing to Mr. Blair's idea. Four refused to comment and said they had not made up their minds, but 10 were against the proposal. Many Labour councillors feared that a directly elected mayor was more likely to come into conflict with an elected Greater London Authority, creating 'gridlock'."

I could not have put it better myself.

On Second Reading, the Minister countered that weight of concern by producing a letter from the Association of London Government which said that the Labour leaders were mistaken when they expressed their opposition to our proposals for an assembly of borough leaders. The letter deserves closer scrutiny. It was written by the leader of Haringey council, which has more fraud investigations going on than you, Mr. Lord, have had hot dinners. I would not hold it out as a shining example of the voice of London.

But then we note that the letter was written, not by a Mr. Harris, but by a newly ennobled Lord Harris. The next thing that we observe is that he is one of Tony's cronies. Then we see that the letter is dated 14 December 1998. For those who were not present on Second Reading, that was the day before. What a surprise. One can imagine the Minister, who is an honourable man, picking up the phone and saying, "Toby, old chap, the Tories are banging on about their assembly proposals again. Do you think you could drop me a line generally rubbishing the whole idea?"

Mr. Raynsford: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that no such telephone conversation occurred. If he reads the letter—the Committee deserves to have it read—he will see that it says:

"I note that the Opposition have put down a reasoned amendment to the GLA Bill Second Reading in which they call for an Assembly consisting of representatives nominated by the London boroughs . . .

This is not a view shared by the majority of boroughs in the Association of London Government."

That is the clear view: the Opposition proposal does not command the support of the majority of boroughs, on whose behalf they are supposedly arguing.

Mr. Ottaway: The Minister has pre-empted my next point. I had a look at the nature of the consultation conducted by Lord Harris among the ALG and its membership and found that that view was not mooted in the ALG. It popped up at the leaders' committee several months ago. No vote was taken and there was no debate. The truth is that that letter is not worth the paper it is printed on.

We propose that the assembly be made up of representatives of the London boroughs. That sound and solid proposal would avoid the conflict described by the hon. Member for Putney and the gridlock described by the majority of Labour party leaders in London.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I am concerned about the Conservative party proposal for using representatives from the boroughs, which would make 33 members. A deputy mayor would be extra. Labour Members are going for a streamlined authority of 25 members. How does the hon. Gentleman justify the extra cost? The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) talked about more politicians and bureaucrats. Are not Conservative Members worried about bulking out the bureaucracy?

Mr. Ottaway: I find it hard to follow the hon. Lady's argument. As I understand it, assembly men will be paid. Although that is not in the Bill, and we have not had any word from the Minister, it is the general impression. There may be a financial saving, unless the hon. Lady is saying that the leaders of the London boroughs are paid more than the assembly men. We need to think through whether there will be more expense, and I venture to suggest that our proposal will be cheaper. The leader of Hammersmith council is trying to pay himself £40,000 a year, but Conservative Members would not support that.

Mr. McNulty: There was Conservative support.

Mr. Ottaway: The Conservatives did not support that; they voted against. As a result, the salary will be reduced to £22,000 from next year.

The advantage of the assembly consisting of borough leaders is that the borough representative knows what is going on in his borough. He would be the bridge between the man in the street and the mayor. The Minister has said that the proposal will not work. His concept is that, once elected, assembly members should think strategically and have no regard for borough interests. He does not want them pushing forward their case at local level, but wants them to think of London as a whole. That is complete twaddle. It ignores human nature, but, even worse, it is an attempt to rewrite the democratic process.

Does the Minister honestly think that constituency members will not argue their case? A feature of the Labour-dominated London fire and civil defence authority is that it is always cutting the number of fire appliances on the streets. Having recently closed a fire station in my constituency, it is seeking to close another.

Does the Minister honestly believe that the assembly member for Croydon and Sutton would not lobby to keep such a fire station? Does he think that the assembly man for Greenwich and Lewisham would not have something to say about a proposal for a major development in Greenwich, or does he really think that the assembly man would stand back and think strategically? Does he think that constituency members on the police committee would not fight against closure of police stations? If he does, he totally misunderstands human nature. His only argument against an assembly of borough leaders is that they will fight their corner. Whoever is in the assembly will fight their corner.

6.45 pm

The Bill confirms that the assembly will be enfeebled. Other than supplying the chairmen and members of the four functional bodies, and other than in the unlikely event of a two-thirds majority opposing a mayoral budget, it will be essentially powerless and useless. The assembly is superfluous and likely only to add to the mayor's problems and the degree of bureaucratic entanglement generated by the new system.

That could be easily overcome by recognising the strength, importance and role of the London boroughs in the overall government of London and by having an assembly made up of borough representatives. London is a city of villages. The boroughs are the voice of the villages and the Minister ignores those voices at his peril.

Mr. Edward Davey: I shall comment briefly on the Conservative amendments and what the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) has said. The Liberal Democrats certainly do not support his idea of the assembly being made up of borough leaders, for a number of reasons. First, borough leaders have something else to do—run their boroughs.

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Our amendment provides for an assembly of borough representatives rather than borough leaders.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's clarification, but in other debates the Conservatives have suggested that borough leaders would make up the assembly. Borough representatives would presumably be elected councillors, if there is to be any element of democracy. Even an ordinary ward councillor has an awful lot to do, or should be doing an awful lot, for his constituents, who he has been elected to represent.

Asking people to represent their constituents in two different places would reduce their ability to hold the mayor to account. We want to ensure that the mayor is held properly to account. That should be done by elected members, whose sole job it would be, which would ensure that the assembly has more power. The Conservative amendment would reduce the power of the assembly and reduce the ability of its members to hold the mayor to account effectively, which is a dangerous path to take.

The idea that borough representatives would take experience of what they do in the borough up to the assembly does not wash. The assembly will do different things primarily. The hon. Member for Croydon, South said that some borough powers are taken away by the Bill. That is true, and we shall return to the matter, but relatively few powers are being taken to the assembly. The assembly and the authority will focus far more on other issues—transport and the police in particular—so it is just as well that other people with a different mandate have the job of considering those issues.

I agree with the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who seemed to be worried that borough representatives would form a parochial Greater London authority. I share his concern, and I know that the Government are also concerned. Assembly members must be able to take a strategic overview. That will lead to better government for London, not worse.

The point made by the hon. Member for Croydon, South about the need for liaison between the boroughs and the GLA was well made, but it is debatable whether it needs to be in the Bill. The boroughs, collectively, will want to liaise and consult with the GLA. Perhaps the Committee should be debating whether such an obligation should be in the Bill. Although that is not the main thrust of the Conservative amendment, it is an interesting point and I hope that the Committee will return to it.

Our amendments seek to increase the number of assembly members by increasing the number that would be elected from constituencies and the number on the list. Our vision of London government differs slightly from the Government's, as we believe in a much stronger assembly that would be both more democratic and have more powers. In our response to the Government's consultation, we made it clear that we felt that the Greater London authority should have a voice in the running of the health service and further education in London. Further education and health are functions with a strategic characteristic, and it would make sense for a strategic body to be able to hold health and education authorities to account.

Given that our model would oversee a much larger budget than the Bill proposes, it is important to have more assembly members to fulfil those tasks effectively.

Mr. Forth: As the hon. Gentleman develops his argument for an increase in the number of representatives, and before we are asked to decide on the merits of the case, will he give us his estimate of the increase in the cost to London taxpayers of that level of representation?

Mr. Davey: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point: the House should always consider the cost of proposals before it. If he reads the amendments he will see that we propose to increase the number of representatives from 25 to 40—an increase of 15. The Conservative party wants an increase of eight. The costs involved are not huge. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Liberal Democrats did not want a mayoral office to be created. Were that option before us today, a huge sum could be saved, allowing us to have even more members of a proper assembly. The mayor is an expensive element because of all the trappings of mayoral office.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I note that the hon. Gentleman is a recruit to Herbert Morrison's theory, which was that the health service should be within the control of the then London county council. How does he imagine local government could possibly control a national service, and how would that dovetail with surrounding national health service priorities?

Mr. Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to continue my point. I did not realise that I was a recruit to Herbert Morrison's theory. He was a distinguished politician and had the good idea that we should hold public services to account through local government. Ministers say that this is not local government, but citywide government. It is a unique form of government. Liberal Democrats believe that NHS planning should be done regionally and on a strategic basis, and that it should be held to account regionally and strategically. The sort of issues involved in a health

[Mr. Davey]

authority the size of London's would be suitable for this type of body. As the Minister said, it does not replicate local government.

Mr. Gapes: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he would be happy to have different provision for medical treatment in different regions of the country? Is the Liberal Democrat policy now to have separatism within the health service and other services?

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. If he believes that we have national standards and a uniform service provision in the health service now because it is planned nationally, he has clearly not visited hospitals and health authorities around the country. They have totally different purchasing plans and service levels now. We simply argue that the health service should be democratic, which is why we want to expand the number of assembly members and hold the health service to account. I am more than happy to see different services provided across the country, but the idea that that does not happen now is nonsense.

Mrs. Lait: The hon. Gentleman's proposal for strategic control of the health service existed on a local basis until the end of the 1980s. I am glad to say that we reformed it. Local government representatives sat on family practitioner committees. I happened to chair one such committee at that time, and it was difficult to get a decision out of that forum. Does the hon. Gentleman want a strategic authority that is unable to make decisions about the NHS?

Mr. Davey: Just because a previous form of democracy within the health service did not work does not mean that we cannot make it work. It works effectively in other countries, such as Sweden. The Landsting, which are equivalent to large county councils, hold the health service to account and look after major expenditure raised from taxation. The idea that one cannot make the health service democratic does not bear examination. I agree with the hon. Lady that previous systems were not perfect, but we cannot reform democracy by abolishing it. We seek to improve it.

Democracy in the health service can be introduced at local government level. It is absurd that in the London boroughs, social services are separate from health services and therefore unable to join their budgets to achieve greater efficiency and co-operation. I had an interesting dialogue with the Minister on the subject recently and I know that the Government want to bring those services together. I hope that doing so will not reduce accountability. We welcome the Government's desire to increase that.

The other reason that we want more representatives is to give the assembly more power. We want it to be able to hold the mayor to account more effectively. Our model would give the assembly more power than the model proposed in the Bill. More fundamentally, an increased number of representatives would give the assembly greater representation. Even under our proposals, each member would still represent fewer people than a London Member of Parliament does, but members would clearly be more representative.

Our proposals are logical and consistent with our proposals for the electoral system, which we will debate later. We favour the single transferable vote system, which requires multi-member constituencies. Such a system is logical if we have more assembly members. Increasing the number of members to 40 would facilitate that.

My arguments so far have been based on our perfect model for the Greater London authority, which would give the assembly more power. However, the argument for having more members still holds under the Government's proposals—the number of functions that the Government propose to give the Greater London authority and how they want to elect it. In terms of representation, an increased number of members will enable the authority to be more representative, which will increase accountability and links with constituents.

We also want members of the authority to be active on the committees. The Government are setting up a number of bodies: Transport for London; the London Development agency; the Metropolitan Police authority; and the London Fire and Emergency Planning authority. There should be enough assembly representatives to ensure that they are held properly to account. The mayor will be held to account for how he runs those bodies.

Mr. Randall: I am a little confused. On the one hand, the hon. Gentleman suggests that there should be no constituency link and, on the other, he says that the increased number of representatives would increase the link with constituencies. Which does he think will benefit the assembly?

7 pm

Mr. Davey: I think that the hon. Gentleman is slightly confused. Whatever body people are elected to, they have a constituency. It may not be a parliamentary constituency or a borough constituency, but they have a constituency. If there were 40 members, and 23 were directly elected from constituencies—as our amendment proposes—the currently proposed boundaries would have to be changed.

Mr. Randall: I am confused, because earlier, when the hon. Gentleman agreed with some of the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), he was worried about the link with the constituency as a place. The suggestion now seems to be that the increase in numbers will be beneficial, as the assembly men will have a link with a geographical location.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for that clarification, because I clearly misunderstood the hon. Gentleman's previous intervention. The point that I was making earlier was that we did not want the constituencies to be the same as the boroughs. We did not want members of the assembly to speak for the royal borough of Kingston or the borough of Richmond. Unless we are to have a list system for the whole of London, they will have constituencies with which they will have a link. The point that I was making to the hon. Member for Gainsborough was that the constituencies should not be identical to the current boroughs, because that would add to the parochialism.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that, as they would not have a direct constituency link,

all the new Liberal Democrat members would speak for his party? What does he mean? Who else would they speak for, apart from themselves?

Mr. Davey: I am slightly confused by the hon. Lady's questions. The Liberal Democrats' preferred electoral system is the single transferable vote, which includes multi-member constituencies, so assembly members would have a constituency link and would be standing for a party. We admit that the Government are unlikely to change their mind and opt for a single transferable vote electoral system for the Greater London authority. We shall have to live with the dual system, which has constituencies and party lists. We believe that people will be free to speak for their constituencies, so I do not understand the hon. Lady's point.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I simply want a little clarification, because I am not terribly bright. The hon. Gentleman says that it does not matter if assembly members do not have constituencies, because they will nevertheless speak for their constituencies. There is certainly a problem with the English language here—which is not new, heaven help us. If they are not speaking for their political party or for a particular geographical area, how do they define their constituency representations?

Mr. Davey: Assembly members will speak for their constituents and for their political party. Members from the party lists will not have a geographical constituency, but the directly elected members will, and we have no problem with that. The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) was worried that I was being inconsistent. He suggested that I was against parochialism, and was therefore against constituencies, but that does not follow. I was concerned that, under the Conservative amendment, the constituencies would be the same as the boroughs, so there would be competing forces within a borough to represent the area. That would increase parochialism. If the constituencies are different, that is unlikely to happen.

I hope that I have made myself clear to the hon. Lady, but I am more than happy to take another intervention.

Mrs. Dunwoody: The hon. Gentleman is as clear as the Liberal Democrat party ever is.

Mr. Davey: In the hon. Lady's opinion.

The idea of having more members on the assembly fits in with the Government's plans, because it would allow greater representation and increased accountability, and would enable members to be more active on committees. I wonder whether the real reason why the Government have gone for such a small number of members is because they are worried about the tabloids. They are concerned about arguments, such as that made by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), that this proposal would be costly. They want a soundbite: they want to say that this will be a lean machine—a slim, streamlined government.

We argue that it is pretty lean and streamlined at 40 members—which is fewer than most borough councils have—as it is being asked to look after transport for the whole of London and to have a link with the Metropolitan Police authority. We do not think that an assembly of 40 members would be costly and weighed down.

The Government should reflect on our proposals to give the assembly more members. I hope that they will leave a door open, because as the Greater London authority develops over time—if it follows the model proposed by the Government—in a few years, if the Labour party is re-elected and its creation is doing well, unlike the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), it may want to give it more functions. If it gives the authority more functions, it may want it to have more members. I hope that the Government will not close the door on the idea that the assembly should have more members and should become more powerful.

I shall deal with two other amendments. Amendment No. 24 concerns the Local Government Commission and boundary changes. It is rather odd that any proposal to consider the boundaries will be triggered by the Secretary of State. The boundary commission has long had a rolling programme for parliamentary constituencies and European parliamentary constituencies. Under the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, the commission is required to report not less than every eight years and not more than every 12 years, so it is automatic and is not at the behest of the Secretary of State. We propose that, rather than the Secretary of State being the trigger, it is left to the Local Government Commission to instigate reviews of the GLA boundaries. That would remove some power from the Secretary of State—the Minister will see, as we go through the Bill, that that is a theme of our amendments—and would ensure that there is no suspicion of gerrymandering when the GLA boundaries are reviewed.

I think it is amendment No. 75 in which the Conservatives are proposing that the rules governing the constituency boundaries in the GLA could be varied. The Liberal Democrats have no problem with that. We think that it makes sense to have flexibility.

I hope that the Minister will cover our substantive point. We believe that there should be more assembly members to ensure that the mayor is properly held to account.

Mr. McNulty: The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) referred to amendment No. 75, which is in the next group of amendments. It is a daft idea for the boundary commission, suitably empowered, to review the GLA boundaries within 12 months of every election. He referred to the commission's eight to 12-year rolling programme, but for some peculiar reason he wants the review of GLA boundaries to be carried out 12 months after the election, which is rather silly.

I have to say, with the greatest respect and the best will in the world, that the hon. Gentleman wittered on for more than 20 minutes and said precisely nothing, other than the mantra-like incantation we always get from Liberal Democrats that if they say something often enough it becomes true. He argued that more members equals greater representation. Why? He gave no reason—just that more members equals greater representation. We were told that if we increased the number of assembly members it would give them more power. We were not given the reason why—just that it would, as though Paddy could sprinkle magic dust over them and they would have more power because there would be 40 of them.

Let us talk about realities. Why do the Liberal Democrats want 40 members? It is because some candidates from their party may get elected. In all

[Mr. McNulty]

likelihood, under the current proposals, no Liberal Democrats will be elected—absolutely none. Let us be honest.

The Liberal Democrats might just squeeze one of the pompous little clones coming out of Cowley street into a directly elected position if there were an increase from 14 to 23. If tonight's speeches are anything to go by—and we face more of the same for two months in Committee—the Liberal Democrats would be lucky to get one if there were 100 directly elected members. No justification has been offered for 23 as opposed to 14, as in the Bill, or for 17 as opposed to 11 in terms of the list.

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is to charm what the Deputy Prime Minister is to sophistication. Sometimes, having more elected members enables a Government to be held more to account, and is more representative. Otherwise, it could be argued that this place should have 100 Members: then—following the hon. Gentleman's argument—this place would be no less representative and we would be able to hold the Government effectively to account. There are many cases where having more elected representatives increases democracy and improves accountability.

Mr. McNulty: The hon. Gentleman is hoist on his own petard. I did not hear "sometimes" or "on some occasions" when he was waxing lyrical in his peroration. Now, in response to what I have said, those expressions trickle out. Yes, of course, sometimes more members means greater representation—sometimes. That is not what he said earlier. As for his joke, the hon. Gentleman should give Bob Monkhouse his joke book back. With all good will, I do not treat the Liberal Democrats' proposals seriously at all because they are loaded with self-interest and nothing more.

I say to the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), the Conservative spokesman, that at least his party's proposals are legitimate. We have heard them before; they are not new, they are old hat and they are hackneyed, but at least they are legitimate. I happen to believe that the proposals are not the right way to go, but the hon. Gentleman described his case, extremely well, as complete twaddle, and so are the proposals.

In terms of the strategic governance of London, the Conservative proposals offer no way forward at all. They may be a pro tem measure, following the vandalism of destroying the GLC and putting the London residuary body in place. A plethora of bodies were generated, four of which were on the model proposed by the Conservatives. However, the London planning advisory committee, within a framework, worked, as did the London research centre, the London borough grants committee and—despite the comments of the hon. Member for Croydon, South—the London fire and civil defence authority.

In terms of looking after small portions of the strategic concerns of London, having indirectly appointed members from boroughs has worked—but only as a pro tem measure. We are putting those bodies back together, and adding our proposals on transport and other areas. To suggest that indirectly appointed members from each borough should carry out those functions is a complete nonsense. That does not fit with the thrust of the Bill at all, and should be rejected.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South has suggested a number of times—although his contributions belie it—that he is the fount of all knowledge when it comes to human nature. I said on Second Reading that the notion that, somehow, all assembly members—directly elected or otherwise—for the 14 constituencies, or the 11 on the list, will be parochialism-free is nonsense. The notion that the member representing Brent and Harrow might just occasionally look after the interests of Brent and Harrow in a strategic sense, or might speak for the people, is fair. However, the undemocratic measure proposed by the amendment would institute and formalise the notion of parochialism.

Within the strategic context of London, there is a distinct north-west London view that is different from a west London view and from a north London view—and is certainly different from anything south of the river. I would expect my assembly member to represent that view, and Brent and Harrow sit together neatly in all sorts of ways. However, the assembly member should represent those views in the context of the strategic whole that is London.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton made one good point—there may have been others; I may be ungenerous. He said that despite all the fears and scaremongering, the Bill does not significantly diminish the power of boroughs as was suggested on Second Reading and during the passage of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Act 1998. The Bill takes some powers away within a strategic framework, but that is right and proper.

7.15 pm

Within that context—because we are, after all, talking about the composition of the assembly in terms of the number of constituencies—I believe that the model proposed in the Bill is the only appropriate one. The notion of multi-member constituencies and single transferable vote—all that nonsense—does not work, either.

The notion of nominating representatives from boroughs has been mentioned. The point was made that leaders would be too busy, but, to be fair to the hon. Member for Croydon, South, there is no reference to leaders, only to nominated representatives. The notion that they could do the job that full-time members of the GLA will be charged with—that of looking after London's strategic interest—is complete nonsense.

The proposition that, somehow, we should have more members to sprinkle around the committees is also nonsense. Full-time members will be charged with looking after London's strategic vision, and they can probably manage two or three committees. Certainly, that is something that the Liberal Democrats in Harrow could never manage. They were never there—even when they were supposed to be running the place. In the interests of the strategic vision for London, as outlined in the Bill, the only way forward is the 14-11 split in terms of the constituencies, as alluded to earlier by my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction.

I wish to make one throwaway point. I would not wish people to think that I am a pedant, but I do not understand why amendment No. 13 has been included in this group as it does not fit in with what the hon. Member for Croydon, South said about appointed members.

The amendment proposes that one borough should equal one constituency. I do not know how that fits in with the group, but it may be a slip-up. I urge the Committee to resist the amendments—they are nonsense.

Mr. Leigh: I have some sympathy with what the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) was saying about the one and only Liberal who might serve on the GLA, because I had the distinction of being the only sitting member of the GLC ever to lose to a Liberal, thereby ensuring that the Liberals achieved, in the shape of Adrian Slade, their one and only representative ever on the old GLC.

This has been an interesting debate, and has shown up some of the difficulties that the new body will face. I have considerable sympathy for what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) said. I have served on boroughs and on the GLC, and I am genuinely neutral on the matter. I am an interloper from the rural fields of Lincolnshire—I have no stake at all. Hon. Members might wonder why I am speaking in the debate. In any event, I shall be brief and share my experiences with the Committee.

If representatives were elected on to the new body from boroughs, they would see themselves as being the voice of the borough on the new body, rather than the voice of the people. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South may think that that is fair enough. However, I used to serve on organisations such as the London Boroughs Association, and the problem is that it would not be the leader of the council who would be nominated to serve on the body—he would be far too busy; it would not even be the high-fliers—the chairmen of the committees; it would be the semi-retired, older members—Alderman Pompous or Councillor Hack—who would be put on the new body,

Having served on bodies such as the LBA, I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South that they are irredeemably tedious and are staffed by people who, although they are very worthy, would not set London alight. I am not sure that anyone serving on the new body would be capable of setting London alight, but those people certainly would not. I have some doubts about what my hon. Friend said, but the amendment is perfectly serious and should be debated. My hon. Friend said that there would be tension between the GLA and the boroughs. However, if there were no tension, there would be no point in having the GLA. Tension can be a creative and useful force.

We all know that the old Greater London council did not work very well, although I greatly irritated Lady Thatcher by voting against its abolition at every stage, because I was convinced that nothing would be achieved by that, and I still believe it. Nothing has been achieved politically, because the powers were simply passed down from a body that we sometimes won to bodies in inner London that we never won. A lot of irritation was caused to London people. The party has now, wisely in my view, gone back on the policy of abolishing the GLC. It still does not believe in the GLA, but it accepts the concept of London government in the shape of a mayor.

There will always be tensions; one cannot avoid them. I appreciate what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South is trying to do: he wants to create something more sensible and creative that will work in the way that the GLC never did. The GLC did not work well because it was always trying to be a strategic body, but that is an amorphous phrase that has little meaning. What is a strategic body? Funnily enough, the GLC worked better in its old days as the London county council, when it was not a strategic body and carried out direct functions involving public housing and other matters. I say that as a Conservative Member, knowing that we never won the LCC.

Mr. Brooke: We did.

Mr. Leigh: My right hon. Friend is a distinguished historian, and I knew that he would interrupt me, but I think that I am right in saying that we never won the LCC after the second world war, although we had a distinguished record in running it sometimes before then.

There will always be problems. My view is that the GLA is probably doomed as a body. It will come into being and work, but the centre of power in London government is now moving remorselessly towards the mayor's office. That is where all the political interest will be and where all the high fliers will want to end up. I fear that the GLA will become a token body, at best a creature of the mayor.

I have adduced all the problems, but what is the solution? It is easy to criticise, but far more difficult to be in the Minister's seat and try to create systems that work. We have had so many models of government for London. I do not know what the solution is, but I have an idea. Perhaps we should not have members of the GLA appointed directly from the boroughs, for the reasons that I have given; perhaps we should not go down the route proposed by the Liberals, which seems to be unduly cumbersome; and perhaps a solution that used to work quite well in the early days of the GLC, before I joined it, is sensible.

The GLC used to have separate members who effectively represented boroughs, rather than individual constituencies, as was the case when I joined. They were not borough members, but they represented areas that were similar or exactly equal to the boroughs, so they had a borough interest. It has been said repeatedly in this debate—and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South rightly chided me on the point—that, whether members represent boroughs, constituencies or wards, they will inevitably take some parochial interest; and perhaps that is no bad thing. If people were elected to the GLA to represent areas corresponding to boroughs, they would be able to balance priorities between parochial and wider London interests.

I want to say a word in defence of members of the old GLC, and people who will now no doubt serve on the new GLA. They have often had a bad name. I served happily on the GLC with my current pair—although we are not allowed to pair now—the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who was a conscientious member of the GLC, although we disagreed politically.

It is true that many members of the GLC were parliamentarian manqués and tried to create a little parliament over the river, which may have been rather pathetic in many ways, but people such as Horace Cutler, Desmond Plummer and Richard Brew on my side,

[Mr. Leigh]

and many on the other side, were absolutely committed to good governance in London, and I am sure that those who serve on the new GLA will be equally committed.

Mr. Darvill: Once again, the Opposition are flawed in their thinking. We will frequently return to the overarching theme that the GLA will be a strategic authority. Contrary to what the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) said, I do not consider that an amorphous concept: I think that it is relevant and needed.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) made two major points against the Bill's provisions, in support of the amendment. He complained that powers and duties were to be taken away from local authorities and that there was no obligation on the mayor and assembly to liaise with those authorities. I believe that he was wrong—powers will not be taken away from local authorities. Clause 27 sets out expressly the powers that the GLA will have: it prohibits expenditure on housing, education, social services and health services. No doubt when the Committee discusses the GLA's general powers, more consideration will be given to how local authorities will be affected.

The strategic role of Londonwide non-elected bodies will be taken back under the democratic accountability that was removed by the previous Government when they abolished the GLC. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) listed those bodies clearly a few moments ago.

On liaison, the hon. Member for Croydon, South was again wrong. For example, clause 126 provides that each London borough council will provide local implementation plans for transport strategy. Both implicitly and expressly, that creates the liaison that he complained was not in the Bill.

The amendment suggests a larger, non-elected, nominated body, which would inevitably be parochial and undemocratic because of its constitution. That is basically wrong. I have greater sympathy with the Liberal amendments in the group, but the argument for them has not been clearly made and I think that, on balance, a 25-member assembly will be right. I urge the Committee to reject all the amendments.

Mr. Brooke: The clause 1 stand part debate concerned the main and essential principle of the Bill, and everything that follows clause 1 is essentially detail. We embarked on that detail on the previous group of amendments. I agree with the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) that the best is the enemy of the good, but the fact remains that it is our duty, both down on the Floor of the House and for weeks and weeks Upstairs, to seek to improve the Bill, as we are setting a framework that will govern London well into the next millennium.

A debate on the detail is important, and I hope that the Committee's enthusiasm can be maintained throughout our proceedings, so that we can remain vigilant. We do not think that everything in the Bill is bad—I have already acknowledged that there are good things about it—but, even if we do not aim to make the good best, there is no reason for not seeking to make the good better, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) on initiating this debate.

As I understand it, the Government's main objection to the amendment is that, if the assembly simply consists of representatives of the boroughs, nimbyism will flourish and a strategic view will not be taken. I am not my brother's keeper, so of course I do not know every single thing that my Member of the European Parliament does, but the only time I ever come across him is when he is taking up domestic matters in the constituency that have nothing to do with Europe. No doubt he spends some time on Europe, but he has no hesitation at all in taking up any domestic, local issue if it will gain him some column inches in the local press. Clearly, in that respect he is not doing his European job per se.

What my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) said about the GLC, from his direct experience, reinforces my uneasy feeling that the enthusiasm for concentrating on people who will take only a strategic view will not insulate us from people who will in fact take considerable interest in local matters.

7.30 pm

The great Lord Slim, commander of the 14th Army in the second world war, wrote in an essay after he had ceased to be an active soldier, that it was characteristic of the British Army that it was always required to fight uphill, and always required to fight at the juncture of two or more maps. The logic of that was that the strategists did not place the Army in the best possible position in which to fight a war. One of the characteristics of charity law nowadays is that trustees are supposed to exercise strategic roles and to guide their charities towards long-term aims. In my experience, however, on every charity on which I have served the trustees have become enormously preoccupied with local detail, and they do not, except in very large charities, fulfil that strategic role.

The party list system will cause those who choose candidates to mark people on how strategic they are being. It is also true, however, that if one wishes to be elected or re-elected to anything, one must have a public persona. It would surprise me if those who serve on the London assembly do not seek to acquire a public persona through their actions. I am not convinced that nimbyism will be absent under the Government's proposals.

My second point relates to our other debates on constitutional reform, such as the forthcoming debate between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. If the Lords were to seek greater powers, those powers could be taken only from the Commons. In the same way, if the Government are not to surrender powers to the mayor, the mayor can receive powers only from the boroughs. The boroughs are the check on the mayor, and will provide scrutiny of the mayor. That will necessarily involve tension, but that is no disadvantage in comparison with what the Government propose. Tension can be highly productive.

Thirdly, there is an old saying that it is sensible to turn poachers into gamekeepers. The Government's proposition in the previous set of amendments was that a gamekeeper should be turned into a poacher in the form of the deputy mayor. Whether that is sensible, I doubt. We shall later analyse the assembly's powers to hold the mayor to account, and I shall be surprised if those powers turn out to be other than fairly sparse.

Fourthly, it is paradoxical that the Government are seeking in many other ways to devolve powers to local authorities. In the context of the government of London,

the Government expressed enthusiasm in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 for the idea of involving local authorities in working with the police on better policing and on prevention of crime. That is good, but the logic is that the consultative responsibility for the police should be taken down to local authority level, and that is a subject that we may consider later in the Bill's passage. It is curious that all sorts of matters are being moved towards local authorities, but that the London local authority is not considered appropriate to fulfil the role for which the amendment presses.

Finally, the Association of London Government has been kind enough to send all hon. Members advice on the clauses before us. It states:

> "In particular, the Association wishes to ensure that there are adequate arrangements for involving borough councillors in the activities of the new authority and its functional bodies where appropriate."

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South for having devised an amendment that responds so admirably to that desire.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, because Bromley was the borough that took on the Greater London council's "Fares Fair" policy. Residents of Bromley still have concerns about the possible overweening power of an elected authority over the borough. The assembly will be responsible for transport, and that includes the underground. There are, of course, no tube stations in Bromley, and residents will closely examine any expenditure on the tube in case it disadvantages Bromley in any way.

That is one reason why I support the amendment to allow representatives of the local authorities to make up the assembly. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) drew a parallel with the role of Members of the European Parliament and the way in which their interests are parochial when they wish to get into the local paper. There is a further parallel with the Council of Ministers, which is made up of elected Members of Parliament who become Ministers who are nominated to sit on the relevant Council. The amendment is precisely analogous.

I stand to be corrected, but I am not aware of the Labour party having put forward proposals to amend the treaty of Rome to change the system of the Council of Ministers. I should feel more convinced of the Government's desire to have an elected assembly if they would move towards an elected Council of Ministers in Europe, which would be an interesting constitutional upheaval. I shall go no further down that route, but I draw the parallel: the Council of Ministers is the authoritative body in the European Union, and if we are to have a truly authoritative body to run London, a nominated authority could be most effective in truly representing the voters and in knowing what the voters want.

I have lived both north and south of the river, and I can agree and disagree with what has been said about disagreements between the two. It all depends on what the issue is. To say blithely that there is no continuity of interests in the geographic areas around London is to fly in the face of reality. There is no reason why we cannot have a truly effective authority, which the Government want, by having a representative authority rather than an elected one.

Mr. Randall: The debate seems essentially to be about whether the emphasis of the strategic authority will be on constituency links, or, to put it in the more denigrating way that many hon. Members have put it, parochial matters. The Government appear to believe that the only way in which to make the authority strategic is to move away from the constituency link, although the directly elected members will, despite the largeness of their areas, retain a vestige of the link.

I fervently believe in the constituency link. It is important to Members of Parliament, and it would be equally so for members of the assembly. That is not so say that I, like other hon. Members, cannot take the strategic view—if that is the correct buzz word. To be more old-fashioned about it, I would say that I put my country first, then my constituency and then, somewhere lower, my party. I do not understand why representatives from the boroughs could not put London first, their boroughs second and their party interests at the bottom of the list.

I take issue with my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). I do not understand why the has-beens and the never-will-bes would be sent to such an important assembly. Occasionally, one is put on committees—I may have been on some myself—that are not necessarily for the high flyers and I am sure that I have a long and distinguished career ahead in such committees, but surely the boroughs will send their best people to ensure that they are represented in the way that they want.

Unlike some Labour Members, notably the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), I concede that there should be much debate on the subject. There is a measure of consensus. If the Government are so unhappy about having nominated representatives in the boroughs, perhaps they will consider the possibility of directly elected members to represent boroughs rather than those larger and strangely tied together areas. For that reason, if our amendment is not accepted, I hope that the Government will consider maintaining some stronger form of constituency link than is proposed because that is the very basis of our democracy here.

Ms Glenda Jackson: This has been a fascinating debate, with some remarkable contributions. The speech by the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) was surprising. In the beginning, he said that the Opposition believe in a mayor, sliding over the fact that that was a major U-turn on the part of the Conservative party. In fairness however, he barely got into his stride when his right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) leapt to his feet. As a former Secretary of State for the Environment, he was much concerned at what he perceived to be a gross intrusion on the part of the mayor and the assembly in the boroughs' desires to create a strategy to remove their waste. He thought it appalling that individual boroughs should have to consider their neighbouring boroughs. That was from a member of a previous Administration who had permitted Westminster council to stop moving its waste by the River Thames and allowed it to move it by road with never a thought for the additional pollution that it put on the roads of Westminster's neighbouring boroughs. One reason why the boroughs welcome our proposal so warmly is because they and Londoners are crying out for a proper strategy for waste, recycling and improving our environment.

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

The basis of the argument put by the hon. Member for Croydon, South was that the best way to ensure that the assembly meets the needs of Londoners is to appoint one. Initially, he suggested the leaders of the 32 boroughs—I presume that he would have included the City of London, thus making it 33. He then changed to a representative of the boroughs, but proceeded to rubbish the boroughs—be they leaders, representatives or councillors. He was much exercised over a letter that my hon. Friend the Minister for London had occasion to read to the Committee, which he had received from our noble Friend Lord Harris and the Association of London Government.

7.45 pm

I trust that it will reassure the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) to hear that it was not this evening's amendments that occasioned the guard within the Bill to ensure that there is no conflict between the mayor, the assembly and the boroughs. The final paragraph of the letter from the ALG states:

"Finally, we do not see the Assembly leading to conflict between the boroughs and the GLA. Our discussions with the Government leading up to the Bill have reassured us that the GLA is being designed to minimise conflict and to ensure collaboration. For instance, we particularly welcome the provisions of Clause 27, which prohibit the Mayor in becoming involved in key borough functions unless in co-operation".

The basic argument of the hon. Member for Croydon, South is that the Opposition want the boroughs to send a representative, not a leader, because it is the best way to ensure that the assembly best serves the interests of the people of London. However, he then rubbished individual boroughs. Haringey and Hammersmith featured in his contribution. He accused the letter of my noble Friend Lord Harris of demonstrating nothing more than cronyism. Indeed, he stated that the letter from the ALG was not worth the paper that it was printed on. I find it bizarre that someone who clearly holds the borough representatives in such low regard is arguing that those are the people who should automatically be appointed to an assembly.

The hon. Gentleman failed to touch on a particularly important point inasmuch as the Bill is about restoring a democratic voice to the people of London. The official Opposition's proposals would ignore the wishes of Londoners twice. In effect, they would ensure that their choice of borough representative would not be there to do the job that they had elected him or her to do. The proposals would also ignore the voice of Londoners in their directly elected mayor because an unelected assembly could scrutinise an elected mayor. That is hardly a democratic benefit; it is a democratic deficit twice.

The contributions from Conservative Back Benchers were infinitely more constructive than those of the hon. Member for Croydon, South. The amendments that he tabled would wreck the provisions of the Bill—provisions agreed by Parliament and endorsed by the people of London in a referendum held only nine months ago. The contributions of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster and the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) were particularly positive in that both were concerned, in essence, with what is central to our Bill—the good governance of London.

The hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) also made a somewhat surprising contribution inasmuch as she supports the amendment. Yet, when we debated the possibility of an elected deputy mayor earlier—also an Opposition proposal—she argued that directly elected assembly men would be much too busy attempting to reply to their correspondence to constituents to be able truly to scrutinise the mayor's proposals and policies. Apparently, by supporting this amendment, she is perfectly prepared to put in assembly men who have no mandate from the people of London, but who would not be able to deal with their constituents in the boroughs to which they were directly elected.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) attaches importance to a constituency link. There will be constituencies; we have announced the new constituencies for which residents will vote for their assembly members. We are not attempting to mix and match or pour a quart into a pint pot, but proposing modern government of the sort that the people of London have shown, by their overwhelming support in the referendum, that they wish to have introduced.

The Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill contained the question on the ballot paper that was put to the people of London in the referendum. It was quite explicit and asked

"Are you in favour of the government's proposals for a Greater London Authority, made up of an elected mayor and a separately elected assembly?"

Around 70 per cent. of those who voted in the referendum voted yes, and there was a clear yes vote in every London borough. It is astonishing that the Conservative Opposition, which supported a yes vote during the referendum and approved an elected assembly, should come forward with tired old arguments about having appointees rather than elected members. Is that really the new democracy for the new millennium that they seek to establish?

Several Opposition Members, including the hon. Member for Gainsborough, mentioned parochialism. Some felt that the authority would not play its proper part. The point is that the GLA will be a strategic authority concerned with matters that affect the whole of London. I touched lightly on the environment and a proper strategic waste disposal plan, and explained how one borough's actions can adversely affect the lives of people in neighbouring boroughs. That does not mean that the GLA will be unconcerned by issues that arise in individual boroughs or groups of boroughs but that, under the Bill, the GLA cannot ride roughshod over the interests of the boroughs or the decisions that they take. The boroughs do not therefore need to be represented on the GLA.

As a strategic authority, it is essential that the GLA should focus on broad, Londonwide issues. Borough council members are elected to represent the views, and promote the interests, of their boroughs, but sometimes a broader perspective is necessary. It is that broader perspective that directly elected list members of the assembly will be expected to provide. The borough councils will of course continue to have a major part to play in the governance of London. Their role is carefully safeguarded by the Bill. They, if not the Conservative party, have recognised that the GLA is not a threat to them. I quoted the final paragraph of the letter from

the Association of London Government. Indeed, the ALG's briefing on the Bill states:

"The ALG supports this major initiative to give Londoners an elected Mayor and Assembly".

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) made several points in response to the Conservative amendments that chimed closely with our responses. He noted that the strategic nature of our proposals is essential. He inquired why there was no requirement on the mayor and assembly to have a strategic overview of health. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) touched on some of the reasons. There is a requirement in the Bill that the mayor must improve the health of Londoners, but that is part and parcel of the other strategic policies that the mayor and assembly will introduce.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton discerned a lack of democracy in our national health service. I am sure that he knows of the announcement made in the House by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health in which he listed in no small detail the true democratic perspective that will be brought to bear in respect of our NHS and our NHS trusts. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that he wants social services and health departments to work more closely together for the benefit of our constituents. The Government have already begun to put that in place. The most recent standard spending assessment settlement has done precisely that.

I found the Liberal Democrat amendments surprising. An assembly of 40 members is not what Londoners voted for. They backed our proposals for a small, streamlined assembly of 25 members. We intend to deliver for Londoners their wishes, as endorsed by the referendum. That is not through any concern about press comment, whether adverse or pro. We have said all along, in the Green Paper, the White Paper and in the Bill, that the assembly needs to be small, streamlined and strategic in focus. We think that 40 members would far too many. An assembly of 25 members will be large enough to allow it to perform its essential scrutiny and investigative roles without becoming unwieldy and unnecessarily bureaucratic. Its size will allow it to take a strategic view rather than a parochial one, which would lead to competition with the boroughs.

The Liberal Democrats may have proposed a larger assembly because they want it, rather than the mayor, to perform executive functions. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton mentioned that point. To set his mind at rest, let me say that Transport for London is an executive arm of the mayor and assembly, not a body that will discuss what is required for London transport. It does not require membership from the boroughs because it will put in place the policies that the mayor will have campaigned on and that have been validated by the people of London. The Liberal Democrats clearly think that a larger body is needed, but we think that their proposals are a recipe for bigger, more bureaucratic government with more committees and, inevitably, less efficiency. In his typically robust and entertaining contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) shared his interpretation of precisely why the Liberal Democrats propose a larger assembly.

Londoners want action. They backed our proposals for a directly elected mayor coupled with an assembly, thus ensuring that the mayor's activities are open and accountable, because they want action taken in the areas of particular concern to all Londoners. If hon. Members consider the detail of the Liberal Democrat proposals, they will recognise that there is little logical in them. Why have 23 constituency members? I can at least understand—although I do not agree with it—the rationale for an assembly of 33 members, one for each London borough and one the for the City, or for our proposal for 14 constituency members under which we can combine two or three boroughs to form constituencies.

The Liberal Democrat proposals could require boroughs to be divided up into new constituencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich pressed hard to find out who the Liberal Democrats thought representatives for such constituencies would be speaking for. It is an unnecessary and impractical proposal. Londoners could find themselves voting in an entirely new electoral area that was not a borough, an easily recognisable combination of boroughs or a parliamentary constituency but yet another electoral unit. That would produce confusion and severe irritation.

If the amendments were accepted, they would be likely to delay the elections. The Local Government Commission would need to conduct a further review of constituencies, scrapping the thorough work that it has just completed which produced recommendations that have attracted little criticism. A new review would be particularly complex and controversial because the commission would be asked how best to divide up boroughs to create wholly new units. That is a recipe for delay and confusion. The Government believe that a directly elected assembly of 25 members is right for London; it was certainly backed by London. I therefore ask that the amendment be withdrawn.

8 pm

Mr. Brake: I shall briefly pick out a number of the points made by the Minister. She said that Londoners did not vote for 40 assembly members. That is true, but they were not given that choice. If the assembly were to have 23 constituency members, there would be no need to split boroughs as it would be entirely possible to have an arrangement based on boroughs or parliamentary constituencies.

The Minister referred to Transport for London, and we shall return to that matter at another time. However, I am surprised that the Government have chosen to exclude every single assembly member from Transport for London, as I would have thought that assembly members would have a view about transport in London and would have some interesting points to make to that body.

The Minister has failed to respond to Liberal Democrat concern that only 25 assembly members might not have sufficient time to respond to Londonwide issues, to their constituencies, and to the demands of their committees. Many hon. Members will be aware that councils have difficulty in ensuring attendance at meetings and, if the assembly has only a small number of members, there might be difficulties in ensuring that there is adequate representation and adequate consideration.

Ms Jackson: The hon. Gentleman talks about assembly members not having sufficient time, but his analogy is somewhat inaccurate: assembly members will be full-time members.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for that intervention. However, she must also be aware that there will be

[Mr. Brake]

considerable demands on the assembly members because of the sizes of their constituencies and because the members will be a focus for many organisations. The hon. Lady laughs, but I am sure that she accepts that my point is correct. Will the Government reconsider the issue of the number of assembly members and consider whether an expansion of that number would not best serve the interests of Londoners?

Mr. Ottaway: The debate has been a bit of a landmark for me, because the forthright speech of the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) resulted in something on which I could agree with him: his views on the Liberal Democrats.

After 25 minutes, I understood the drift of the speech of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey): he was trying to argue that a member elected by proportional representation could speak up for his constituency. We look forward to hearing how that argument develops.

I was especially grateful for the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). When he and I were in the same association, plotting our political careers in the 1970s, it seemed that his ambitions would inevitably lead him to the Greater London council. For a Conservative Member, his speech was a bit off message, but he was right to highlight the problems that the assembly would inevitably face and he made a thoughtful and welcome contribution.

We heard excellent speeches from other hon. Members. The hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) reached the wrong conclusion for the wrong reasons, but it was a worthy effort. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) was right to warn of the inevitable temptation for an assembly member to speak up for his or her own patch. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) drew an interesting parallel between the amendment and the Council of Ministers. My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) correctly said that the boroughs would make their best proposals in any assembly of borough representatives.

In her speech, the Minister referred, yet again, to the famous letter from Lord Harris, drawing attention to the fact that he did not think that the assembly would lead to conflict with the boroughs. However, Conservative Members made the point that Lord Harris did not fully consult the Association of London Government and that the letter does not reflect the views of the London boroughs, as was shown by the survey that was taken.

Mr. Raynsford: A year ago.

Mr. Ottaway: The Minister says, yet again, that it was a year ago, but I repeat what I told him on Second Reading that, bless its cotton socks, the Labour party has changed its mind on every fundamental issue of the past decade. It takes the biscuit for him to say that the London borough leaders have changed their minds in the past 12 months.

The amendment would allow the London boroughs to be involved, right up to the hilt, in the Greater London authority. If the Government reject the amendment, they will be telling the boroughs that they do not trust the boroughs to make the right decision. The Conservative party will continue to speak up for the London boroughs for a long time to come. We are not satisfied with the Minister's response and we wish to press the amendment to a division.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 115, Noes 339.

Division No. 38] **[8.6 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waller, Robert
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Tim Collins.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Norris, Dan
Osten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Randall, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul

Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Jane Kennedy and
Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I beg to move amendment No. 19, in page 2, line 2, leave out from 'members' to end of line 6 and insert

'representing the multi-member constituencies determined by the Local Government Commission under subsection (4) below.'.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 22, in page 2, line 7, after 'be', insert 'more than'.

No. 74, in page 2, line 15, after 'Mayor', insert 'and'.

No. 75, in page 2, line 16, leave out 'and the London members'.

No. 76, in page 2, line 18, leave out 'or the London members'.

No. 79, in page 2, leave out line 21.

No. 25, in page 2, line 21, leave out from 'of' to second 'the' in line 22.

No. 34, in clause 4, page 3, line 35, leave out from 'constituency' to end of line 37.

No. 39, in page 4, leave out line 2 and insert

'by single transferable vote as set out in Part IAAA to Schedule 2 of this Act'.

No. 38, in page 4, line 2, at end insert

'unless there are three or more candidates.

(4A) If there are three or more candidates in an Assembly constituency—

(a) the constituency member shall be returned under the alternative vote system in accordance with Part IA of Schedule 2 to this Act;

(b) a voter's constituency vote shall accordingly be an alternative vote, that is to say, a vote capable of being given to indicate the voter's preferences from among the candidates.'.

No. 10, in page 4, leave out lines 3 to 18.

No. 40, in page 4, line 4, after first 'a', insert

'candidate who is a member of a'.

No. 41, in page 4, line 5, at end insert—

'(b) a candidate on the list which has been submitted by a registered political party; or'.

No. 42, in page 4, leave out lines 9 to 13 and insert—

'(7) The person who is to be returned as Mayor shall be determined before it is determined who are to be returned as the Assembly members.'.

No. 43, in page 4, leave out lines 14 to 18.

No. 11, in page 4, leave out lines 24 and 25.

No. 44, in schedule 1, page 141, leave out line 25.

No. 29, in page 141, leave out lines 26 and 27.

No. 30, in page 141, leave out lines 31 and 32.

No. 46, in schedule 2, page 143, line 21, at end insert—

'PART IAA—

RETURN OF CONSTITUENCY MEMBERS FOLLOWING A VACANCY

Application

1. This Part of this Schedule applies where there are three or more candidates in an Assembly constituency.

Candidate with overall majority of first preference votes

2. If one of the candidates to be a constituency member receives more than half of all the first preference votes given in the Assembly constituency that candidate shall be returned as the constituency member for that Assembly constituency.

No candidate with overall majority of first preference votes

3.—(1) If none of the candidates to be the constituency member receives more than half of all the first preference votes given in the Assembly constituency, the following provisions of this paragraph shall have effect.

(2) The candidate with the fewest number of first preference votes is eliminated, and the second preference votes given for that candidate shall be ascertained.

(3) The second preference votes under subsection (2) above shall be transferred to the other candidates, being added to the first preference votes cast for the other candidates.

(4) If, following the recalculation under subsection (3) above, none of the candidates receives more than half of the votes, the remaining candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated and the process in subsections (2) and (3) above is carried out.

(5) The process continues until one candidate has received more than half of all the votes, and that person shall be returned as the constituency member for that Assembly constituency.

(6) If, by reason of an equality of total number of preference votes, two or more candidates remaining in the contest each have the greatest total number of preference votes, the constituency returning officer shall decide by lots which of them is to be returned as the constituency member for that Assembly constituency.'.

No. 47, in page 43, line 21, at end insert—*'PART IAAA—*

RETURN OF CONSTITUENCY MEMBERS

Each vote shall have a single transferable vote, that is to say a vote—

(a) capable of being given so as to indicate the voter's order of preference for the candidates for election as members for the constituency, and

(b) capable of being transferred to the next choice—

(i) when the vote is not required to give a prior choice the necessary quota of votes, or

(ii) when, owing to the deficiency in the number of votes given for a prior choice, that choice is eliminated from the list of candidates'.

No. 52, in page 143, line 21, at end insert—'*PART IA*—

RETURN OF CONSTITUENCY MEMBERS

Application

1. This Part of this Schedule applies where there are three or more candidates in an Assembly constituency.

Candidate with overall majority of first preference votes

2. If one of the candidates to be a constituency member receives more than half of all the first preference votes given in the Assembly constituency that candidate shall be returned as the constituency member for that Assembly constituency.

No candidate with overall majority of first preference votes

3.—(1) If none of the candidates to be the constituency member receives more than half of all the first preference votes given in the Assembly constituency, the following provisions of this paragraph shall have effect.

(2) The candidate with the fewest number of first preference votes is eliminated, and the second preference votes given for that candidate shall be ascertained.

(3) The second preference votes under subsection (2) above shall be transferred to the other candidates, being added to the first preference votes cast for the other candidates.

(4) If, following the recalculation under subsection (3) above, none of the candidates receives more than half of the votes, the remaining candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated and the proceed in subsections (2) and (3) above is carried out.

(5) The process continues until one candidate has received more than half of all the votes, and that person shall be returned as the constancy member for that Assembly constituency.

(6) If, by reason of an equality of total number of preference votes, two or more candidates remaining in the contest each have the greatest total number of preference votes, the constituency returning officer shall decide by lots which of them is to be returned as the constituency member for that Assembly constituency.'.

No. 49, in page 143, leave out from beginning of line 22 to end of line 25 on page 145.

No. 53, in page 144, line 5, after 'constituencies', insert

'with votes for candidates listed as members of a registered party counting towards the total vote of that party'.

No. 54, in page 145, line 3, leave out from 'filled' to end of line 4 and insert—

'as follows:

(a) A quota shall be determined which is equal to the total number of votes polled for all the parties divided by the number of seats to be allocated plus one.

(b) Votes cast for the candidate at the top of the party list shall be compared with the number of votes cast for the registered party to which that candidate belongs.

(c) Where the candidate has fewer votes than the quota, the votes for that candidate will then be topped up to reach the quota using votes from the party vote, reducing the number of votes won by the party accordingly.

(d) This process continues for each candidate on the list until the party votes have been exhausted, except where there are insufficient votes in the party vote to top up a candidate, in which case those votes are allocated to the next person on the list with sufficient votes, who moves one place up the list.'.

No. 55, in page 145, line 3, leave out from 'filled' to end of line 4 and insert

'in the order of votes cast for the candidates of that party, with the candidate receiving the highest number of votes being elected first.'.

Mr. Hughes: My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) said that the list of amendments sounds like the London bus timetable and the Minister for London and Construction—if I interpreted his lip movements correctly—said that he hoped that I knew all the amendments by heart.

This collection of amendments—which are taken together for the convenience of the Committee and are, apart from the occasional insertion from the Conservatives, Liberal Democrat amendments—refers to the electoral system. There would not be a debate about structures of government in this country without debates about electoral systems.

Mr. Forth: There would be if the hon. Gentleman was not here.

Mr. Hughes: I do not think that that is true, although the right hon. Gentleman might like it to be true. I do not know what his view is, because he is always a maverick, but even his party wants to change the electoral system.

I shall first issue a disclaimer to the Committee. As I have said before, I am not obsessive about electoral systems or electoral reform. I do not hold the view that there is a perfect electoral system in the world, nor do I think that there is an absolutely imperfect electoral system. All electoral systems are better or worse than one another. We have to select one according to a combination of the wisdom of experience and the objectives for which we set up elected bodies in this country.

I shall describe the amendments—I need not do so at length, but different amendments have been grouped together. I shall then argue that there is a strong case, even at this stage in the proceedings, for reconsidering the electoral system that the Government have chosen to put before the Committee.

After about 18 months of this Administration, we come to this debate with interesting recent experience which is relevant to the issue. Liberal Democrat Members welcome the new Government's willingness to be much more open-minded than their predecessors about constitutional matters. It is interesting that now that the Conservative party is in opposition and has no Members of Parliament in Scotland or Wales, a gradual conversion is taking place among Conservative Members.

I did not leave the Committee during the previous debate to listen to a lecture, apparently entitled, "The British Way", which may have been given elsewhere in the City of Westminster. However, I understand that even the person who may have given that lecture now accepts that the most recent election was a watershed, and that the Conservatives have to move on and realise that the old order is changing and giving way to a new order.

We welcome the Government's clear commitment—which we helped them to make when they were in opposition—to reconsider electoral systems. We are looking forward to changes in those systems in Scotland to govern the first elections to the Scottish Parliament and, in Wales, for elections to the Assembly. We welcome both of those innovations. Last year, a new electoral system was used for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which we also welcomed.

There are interesting differences between all those systems and organisations. The Scottish Parliament system was the result of a consultative process. There were meetings between the Labour party, the Scottish National party, my party and, at the beginning,

[Mr. Hughes]

the Conservative party. Not all the parties stayed the course; some withdrew. The trade unions and Churches were also involved. There was an attempt to come to an agreement in the Scottish convention. The electoral system in Scotland is the product of that. When we debated the Scotland Bill in the House and in Committee, we supported the proposals that we had agreed to in the convention.

The difference between Scotland, which has a proportional system, and London is that we have not had such a convention in London. I slightly regret the fact that the Government did not see fit to hold a pre-legislative convention to find out what agreement there was. We must all take partial responsibility for that failure. I recognise that there was a Green Paper containing proposals that marked a change in the Government's position.

The Welsh Assembly will also be elected using a proportional system. That proposal did not arise from a convention—the Government were persuaded of the merit of the case. The system chosen was not the one that we would have devised, but it is certainly better than the system that the Government inherited in Great Britain generally.

No one disputes the fact that the proportional representation system that was adopted and implemented for the Northern Ireland Assembly was the only way to secure people's participation in the electoral process. One hopes that has been a contributory factor in paving the way towards the resolution of Northern Ireland's conflicts, which have gone on for a long time. The postscript to that point is that Northern Ireland has for some time had a system based on electoral reform and one other than first past the post. Like the Irish republic, Northern Ireland has found that reform convenient and helpful.

That is the recent history of legislation for domestic representative bodies. Just before Christmas, we debated the final chapter of that legislation—the electoral system for the European Parliament. Again, to their credit, the Government changed their position and accepted that a proportional system should be used. After much huffing and puffing and an attempt at the other end of the corridor to blow the House down, it was accepted that the democratically elected, representative House should prevail, and there will now be a proportional system of election for the European Parliament.

That debate has a subplot, which will be raised in reference to the amendments. If a proportional system incorporates a list system, should one have the famous open list or the closed list? The experts will say that there are many subplots. Belgium has produced a version of the list system. Chocolates, chips and electoral systems are clearly the products of that fine kingdom. There are d'Hondt versions and many others.

The basic question for a simple person like me is whether to have an open list, which means that people can choose the position of candidates on the list, or a closed list, in which people can take or leave those positions. Liberal Democrat Members have always argued that, in a list system, it is always better to give people freedom of choice so that the party does not impose its choice.

We have made progress. In all the electoral legislation discussed in this Parliament, the Government have introduced a proportional system. We welcome that. The respective systems are not the same, but that is not inappropriate for two obvious reasons. First, self-evidently, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are different, and elections for a European Parliament are for a different kind of body.

Secondly, the argument that the system in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales must be used in London does not apply because unless electors in London very cleverly arrange their affairs, they do not have a vote in elections in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. The existence of another system in one of the other three countries in the United Kingdom is not an argument for having a similar system in London.

As for London, I pay tribute to the Government, the Secretary of State, who is absent but who is responsible for the Bill, and his Ministers. When we started the debate on London, there was no commitment to proportional representation. It was an open question and the Government consulted on it. They then listened to the overwhelming response of the respondents—many were not political parties or members of political parties, but included lay organisations as well as those concerned with elections—which was that London needed a proportional system.

It is a good thing that the Greater London assembly, whatever its size—a subject that we have just debated—will have a political proportionality. That is welcome for one overriding reason, namely that London is a very large electoral village as well as being the capital city. It contains communities that are very different, geographically and in terms of background. In order to have a spread of representation, we have to make sure that two things happen.

First, as was said earlier today, we must ensure that the voice of the Kent part of London, the Surrey part of London, the Hertfordshire part of London, the Essex part of London as well as that of the old Middlesex part of London—the largest component—is heard and is heard in different ways. The Minister and I both live south of the river but where he lives, people's county cricket team is Kent whereas mine is Surrey, and across the river people's county cricket team is Middlesex. All these people who are part of Greater London must have their important history reflected.

8.30 pm

Secondly, a proportional system—the better the proportionality, the better the system—will allow the creation of an assembly that is balanced in terms of gender and background. For example, the large black community should be able to have black representatives, and the many Asian people in London, some of whom have been citizens here for two, three or four generations, should be able to identify with representatives from the same cultural background. None of us would deny that the objective of the system must be to ensure that the cosmopolitan basis of London is represented.

Ideally, we want a system that allows people to choose not only between parties but within parties, and to choose individuals who are not members of any party. I hope that one of the results of this exercise will be the election of some independents. The hon. Member for Tatton

(Mr. Bell) has shown what a great contribution an Independent can make to a legislative and deliberative assembly. Others have done the same—A. P. Herbert is one who springs to mind from my reading of contributions over the years.

Voters should be able to choose between people in the parties. I hope that we maximise the opportunity for that. For example, a Conservative voter in an outer-London borough, or in my borough, might want to make sure that there are more women in politics. It might be something about which that voter feels strongly, and he should be allowed to say that he would rather have a woman represent him than a man. A young voter might think that there should be more young people in politics. He might not have made up his mind what party he supports, but if he finds a young candidate who seems to be on the ball, he might vote accordingly.

People might also vote for a candidate according to experience and profession. A trade unionist might think it important to elect someone who got his hands dirty doing real work rather than someone who has been only a manager or an administrator. I met people from the pensioners lobby today—I am sure that they will say it is important to include some pensioners in the assembly. Those are our objectives. Before dealing directly with the amendment, I wanted to outline the common ground that exists between us and our common desire to make sure that, whatever disagreements we may have about how we get there, we end up with a body that commands the confidence of people from Bromley to Barnet and the confidence of people of all ages, cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

Mr. Forth: In the context of the desirability of independent members, on which the hon. Gentleman lays great stress, has he considered the implications of clause 11(2)? With reference to the filling of vacancies, it states:

"If the London member was returned as an individual candidate . . . the vacancy shall remain unfilled until the next ordinary election."

That means that if in the London party elections the hon. Gentleman and I elect a sturdily independent candidate who is not on a party list, and if that candidate then resigns or—heaven forbid—dies in office, we risk that vacancy remaining unfilled and our being left unrepresented. If my reading of the subsection is correct, is not it a disincentive to vote for a sturdily independent candidate?

Mr. Hughes: Although I do not want to be tempted too far down the road that leads to a subsequent debate, I shall deal with that point.

I understand why the clause is drafted as it is. The Government have distinguished, as they must, between a person who stands on a party ticket, on a list, and a person who is elected as a cross-London member, as an individual, who, by definition, has no one in the same party as him or her. If an elected party member dies or resigns, the list system not only in this country but worldwide provides that the next person named on the list gets in. People understand that in advance; they know that, if a party gains five seats, they get the first five people on the list, and that, if a vacancy arises, they get the sixth. However, a practical difficulty arises when an independent member is lost.

I share the view of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) that the right answer is not to leave a vacancy. I hope that, when we come to the wider debate, we shall find ways of holding an election to fill the vacancy because I agree that it is unfair that, if we end up with a London assembly of 25 members with one or two independents and one of the latter dies or resigns—perhaps for unavoidable family reasons—we shall lose that independent voice for the rest of that assembly's life. That assembly may sit, however, for four or five years. If we lose an independent member, we should have the chance to elect another independent candidate, as a result of a proper election.

Mr. Forth: It is worse than that. If several members elected from a list resigned and there were not sufficient names on the list to fill the vacancies, would not another electoral embarrassment be in store for those who support such an electoral arrangement?

Mr. Hughes: That is true, and we shall return to that subject, but, unless something very funny happens, I do not anticipate that we shall have a situation such as the one that we had in this place some years ago, when most of the Northern Ireland Members resigned and by-elections were held. Considering the crude politics of it, I believe that there would be pressure from the parties to ensure that large-scale resignations should not take place. Let us consider those perfectly proper issues.

In the full submission that Liberal Democrat Members and representatives in London made to the Green Paper, we argued that the electoral system should follow three principles: fairness to all voters; real natural constituencies; and genuine voter choice. I would argue that the best way of achieving that—not the only way, not something that makes all the other options impossible—is to have the famous single transferable vote. I say that not because we, as a party, have become wedded to that system, picked off the shelf, irrespective of anything else—I believe that we have shown ourselves to be as pragmatic as others—but because all the evidence is that it produces the best choice for the voter, and the most accurate reflection of differences of view.

If an election were held today, according to a proportional system, and if voters followed the voting patterns reflected in the results of the most recent general election, the Labour party would return 12 of the 25 members of the assembly and the other parties would return the remaining 13. Labour would not have a majority in the assembly: no one party would have a majority. When the GLC existed, there was always a three-way split in London politics. Happily, our party has grown; others—naming no names—have diminished more recently, but London has very rarely had a majority of the voters turning out for one party, so there has always been a balance. We therefore seek an electoral system that gives the most accurate balance—because then the system does not distort the conclusion—and voter choice.

As was said in the previous debate, we strongly argue that an advantage of the single transferable vote system is that it allows the reflection of natural geographic communities, especially in outer boroughs. My hon. Friends the Members for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), who represent the borough of Sutton, and my hon. Friends who represent the boroughs of Richmond

[Mr. Hughes]

and Kingston feel very strongly that their communities need to be represented. I strongly share that view. It would have been better, and it would have locked in more strongly people's commitment to the electoral process, if, for example, those parts of London that are Kent had seen themselves as one community, electing four, five or six members, who would then speak collectively, across the party divide, for the Kent part of London.

As I have said, we support the proposition that it should be possible to choose between candidates in the same party. I pray in aid the support of the Institute for Public Policy and Research, which is more closely affiliated with the Labour party than others, for our argument that the best option is the single transferable vote. At the end of December 1997, it said in response to the paper on the Greater London authority:

> "We therefore recommend that the single transferable vote system be implemented in five 5-member constituencies. The advantages are that this would signal a commitment to a more inclusive style of politics, and should contribute to the emergence of an assembly which reflects the diversity of London's population."

STV is used in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, and we believe that it would be the best system for London.

Because we are pragmatists, realists and do not always get what we want—some would argue that a pedigree in the Liberal party means getting used occasionally to not getting what one wants—we have, however, produced alternatives for the Committee to consider. If the Government are not willing to accept our first choice, we offer them a second one, in amendments Nos. 38 and 52, which we hope they will accept.

In amendments Nos. 38 and 52, we suggest that those whom the Government call constituency members—people from the proposed 14 geographical areas, the boundaries for which the Minister has confirmed today—should be elected not by first past the post but by the alternative vote. We then suggest that that should be topped up, becoming a system that has recently become known as the alternative vote plus.

The alternative vote plus has gained credibility since this Parliament began. As a result of its deliberations, the commission that the Government set up on electoral systems for this place has put on the table for public debate and consideration in the House—it must therefore be a valid proposition—a similar system for London, too. The alternative vote plus was recommended by the Jenkins commission in the autumn.

I understand—it is obvious—that the Jenkins commission was set up too late to influence the Green Paper and the White Paper on London. It is therefore no criticism of the Government that they have not picked up its idea. However, I would be grateful if the Minister at least indicated that the Government do not rule out the idea that such a system has merit for London, too. I hope that that will find appeal, and that the Government will say that it is as good a system as any other. As one of the five people who represented the views of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats Members to the Jenkins commission, and having been sceptical about whether it would come up with an appealing system, I think that it has very cleverly and reasonably met hon. Members' objectives of constituency links and proportionality.

It is important—I want the Minister specifically to reply to this—to grasp the nettle of the open list rather than the closed list. The Government propose 11 members elected by lists. All our parties are beginning to ratchet up the process of choosing their representatives for such lists. I think that all our electors resent a little the fact that, in order to influence that process, one must be a member of a political party. Most people in London are not members of any political party. Indeed, with respect to us all, most people have no desire to be so. I do not blame them for that in the slightest.

Members feel very strongly about individuals. One of the banes of our life in debating London government over recent months is that the press, because they think that it is what the public want, speculate far more about who will be in power in London than what they will do. The press spend far more time on who will be the candidates than on what their policies are, but the level of road charges and parking charges will be much more important to Londoners than who is running the city. The policies matter much more than the personalities, although obviously the two go together.

8.45 pm

People like to make a choice. If we present to Londoners a list chosen by our parties, however clever we think we may be, and if we do not give Londoners the chance to say, "I like your team, but I think that person is rubbish and should be at the bottom of the list", we will curtail the debate, the influence and the participation.

Many people might vote because one of the people on the list is their mate, or their former local councillor or the person who led their borough council, or their former Member of Parliament, or someone whom they respect as running a big local business or charity, or someone to whom they can relate, such as a sports personality. However, if they cannot influence whether that person is at the top of the list or at the bottom, they might simply stay at home. I am at one with the Government in wanting to increase participation in elections, so that the result reflects the views and interests of as many people as possible.

We have a preferred choice, which is an alternative to the Government's proposal and allows proportionality by the best system—the single transferable vote. If that is not acceptable, we have a fallback, but we have a keen desire to get the Government to agree to an open-list system, not a closed-list system.

This is an important debate, not because it provides excitement for people who analyse electoral systems every time we debate representative government, but because if we want to allow independents to be elected, and members of parties such as the Green party to be committed to the election and to propose policies, and if we want to maximise the political and democratic input into London, we shall do that best by choosing the electoral process that maximises participation and voter choice. I hope that, by the end of the debate, we shall have moved further along that road, and that the Government, who have already moved a long way, will have moved a little further towards the best electoral system available.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I shall speak to amendments Nos. 10 and 11, the force of which

is to propose that all members of the Greater London assembly should be elected on the first-past-the-post system. Because of the way in which the amendments have been grouped, we shall seek to divide the Committee on amendments Nos. 10 and 11 at another time that is acceptable to the Committee.

On Second Reading on 14 December last year, I pointed out, and it was not denied by the Government, that the Bill introduces what is essentially an experimental form of new government for our capital city. Because of London's national and international significance, it is crucial that the experiment should be made to work. On Second Reading, the Secretary of State was at pains to emphasise that he would take careful notice of the issues of concern raised then and subsequently, during the Bill's passage through Parliament.

Notwithstanding our views about the composition of the assembly, which the Government do not accept, amendments Nos. 10 and 11 would insert into that massive experiment at least a method of electing the members of the new assembly that is tried and tested, and which can deliver accountable and transparent government.

I listened with great care and even greater interest to the speech of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). He explained his party's interest in electoral systems, which he proved this evening by proposing no fewer than four different systems for Londoners to experience. Because of the complexity that he and his party seek to introduce into the matter, we shall vote against the group of amendments that the hon. Gentleman moved. We believe strongly that Londoners need an electoral system for the assembly and also for the mayor—we shall discuss that tomorrow—that can deliver decisive and effective government for the capital.

We are increasingly concerned by the steady step-by-step move away from the constituency basis of our democracy. We are concerned about the unrealistically large constituencies proposed by the Government for the constituency assembly members. Did we hear a change of heart from the Liberal Democrats on the question of open and closed lists? I rather think we did—well, perhaps not a change of heart, but a change in voting intention. However, the combination of large constituencies, proportional representation and the closed-list system represents a move away from the simple accountability and transparency of the first-past-the-post system, which has given the country strong, accountable and decisive administrations at local and national government level for so long.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The right hon. Lady was not being unfair or unreasonable, but just so that there is no misunderstanding among those who read our debates, I should say that there is no change in the Liberal Democrats' position on the list system. During the famous debates before Christmas, our preference was always for open lists. In the end, we compromised and agreed that it was better to have closed lists than no proportional system for Europe. Therefore, our preferred system was then and is now one of open lists. We would have liked it for Europe and we hope that we will get it now.

Mrs. Shephard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courteous explanation, but it will not sway me to support his amendments, which will not surprise him, because no matter what he claims, they would move the government of London yet further from clear accountability and, as a result of their complexity, into incomprehensible confusion.

However, it is unlikely that the Committee will accept the Liberal Democrats' amendments because there is much support on both sides for the first-past-the-post electoral system, and that is not surprising. For centuries, it has provided accountable government which has enabled the electorate not only to hire Governments but also, on occasion, as they did 20 months ago, most decisively to fire them. The first-past-the-post system ensures that the electorate know who should be held accountable for policy, and those elected are more responsive as a result—certainly afterwards.

The first-past-the-post system also provides a direct line between the citizen and his or her elected member, whether of a council or Parliament. Of course it is the case that the Bill proposes the direct election, by the first-past-the-post system, of 14 assembly members, but they will be asked to represent enormous constituencies which bear no relation to existing constituency boundaries. To have to represent a constituency of between 300,000 and 400,000 people makes the job difficult and will certainly cause the 14 members to feel remote from their electors.

The system provides transparent government because it delivers a clearly understood procedure whereby the elector casts a vote directly for the candidate of his or her choice. It provides straightforward government and, above all, it puts people, not parties, in charge of those elected to power.

As I said, 14 members will be directly elected by the first-past-the-post system, but the remaining 11 of the so-called London members will be elected by a system of proportional representation from a closed party list.

I hope that, when the Minister replies, he will explain whether he is concerned about the fact that that will create two classes of assembly members—the 14 members directly elected but rather remote, and the 11 selected by parties, not people.

The Opposition's antipathy to closed lists is well known, as is that of many Labour Members. On 18 November, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Mr. Michie) spoke for many of us on the issue of closed lists when he said:

> "If I get the sack from the people, so be it, but I would rather be sacked by the people than through the fiddling of a party list controlled by people who are almost unknown."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1998 ; Vol. 319, c. 973-74.]

The Government proposal for Londoners of two classes of assembly members by the combination of first past the post for 14 members and a form of proportional representation for the remaining 11 makes no contribution to accountability, transparency or, in particular, democratic principles.

With regard to London members, the public will not be able to vote for named party candidates, although they will be able to do so for a named independent candidate, causing the anomaly which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) raised with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, which will have to be thrashed out in Committee and some sort of solution found. People will

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have to vote for a party when electing London members; the party will choose the order and the people will have no say in the matter.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Given that the two amendments tabled by Conservative Members do not address the issue, and even though I accept that the right hon. Lady will not support us on the single transferable vote, does she share our view that we should pass amendments on open rather than closed lists, if we are to have a list system for parties? Will she and her colleagues at least join forces with us—in Committee and on Report—to vote for amendments providing open rather than closed lists?

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman asks me to commit to a process that will take some time. I am setting out our position on what form the election for the Greater London assembly should take. We are firmly for first past the post and we do not have much truck with the alternatives, at this stage anyway. Given that he has proposed so many alternatives, we shall have a rich opportunity to consider them all.

Mr. Hughes: A last intervention?

Mrs. Shephard: Yes, certainly.

Mr. Hughes: I am always happy to offer a menu that might enlighten the right hon. Lady.

There is one other matter. Has the right hon. Lady considered the fact that, if we keep the first-past-the-post system, her colleagues and her party are likely, in the present political climate, to suffer badly? If she has not considered that, will she add it to the list of alternatives? The first-past-the-post system was not a wow and a success for the Conservative party in Scotland or in Wales at the general election, and it did not appear to deliver huge electoral success in England either. I say this in all seriousness: has she reflected on the fact that it might be wise—if she wants her party and the 25 per cent. of voters who vote Tory to be represented fairly in London—to change her views now rather than be forced to change them after another electoral defeat?

Mr. Forth: What a disgraceful suggestion.

Mrs. Shephard: It is indeed an extraordinary suggestion. It reveals more about the hon. Gentleman and the way that he and his party operate—and, indeed, think—than he perhaps would have wished. I repeat that our principle is that electors should be able to vote for people, not parties, to influence the outcome of elections.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that the system that he has proposed as his choice for the Government to consider this evening was condemned by the Jenkins commission on electoral reform. We believe that its findings have been kicked into touch by the Prime Minister—the Minister may tell us more about that—although it was set up by his Government. The commission said:

> "The Commission recommends that the second vote determining the allocation of Top Up members should allow the voter the choice of either a vote for the party or for an individual candidate from the lists put forward by parties. They should therefore be what are commonly called open rather than closed lists."

That charming hyperbole comes fittingly from its author.

The plethora of voting systems and arrangements to be put in place will not help the clarity of the electoral system in London. We should reflect on the fact that Londoners will be asked to vote for their borough councillors—using the first-past-the-post system—every four years, and for the mayor and assembly every four years, but with a supplementary vote and additional-member systems of which the assembly system is a part. A variety of systems may be used if the Government accept the Liberal Democrat amendment.

Mrs. Lait: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the proposal that we should vote every year in London for our local authorities?

Mrs. Shephard: I am coming to that. In the other three years, Londoners may be asked to vote for a third of their councillors annually, possibly under the first-past-the-post system or perhaps under an alternative system yet to be announced and subject to the result of a referendum—which may or may not take place before the next election—on the system proposed by the Jenkins commission. At the very least, the Government should pause before they compound the confusion that they are creating.

The election proposals in the Bill diminish the accountability and transparency of the important new form of local government that is being set up in London. The diminution of accountability and transparency is more grave because it stems from a fresh start or experiment. Powers will be removed from the boroughs and a body will be created, the members of which will perforce be remote from the public whom they are elected to serve.

In the name of good accountable government for London, I commend the amendments to the Committee and hope that it agrees to divide on them at the appropriate time.

9 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I shall not detain the Committee for long, but I wish to speak against the amendments, which I hope will be resisted.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is used to being a voice crying in the wilderness. For many years, he was the sole Liberal Democrat in London. He has now been joined by a few on the outer periphery, but he is still the only Liberal Democrat in inner London. Thus he will be used to the position in which he finds himself on the single transferable vote—the protagonist for a system in which nobody in this country has ever shown much interest. It is a British invention that has been exported, but has never been appreciated or adopted in its home country. Unlike many of our other inventions, that has happened for good reasons. It has been exported to Ireland and Malta, and the Australian Senate conducts its elections using that system, but it has found no firm foothold in any other country because it has enormous faults. Those become apparent when one looks at the experience of other countries.

The first main fault of the single transferable vote system is that it sets candidates of the same party at each other's throats. That becomes obvious when one studies Irish elections. It is in the interests of a Fianna Fail

candidate not only to oppose Fine Gael candidates in the same constituency, but to poach votes from other Fianna Fail candidates—allegedly on the same ticket. Party colleagues will thus take a position on local issues designed to persuade Fianna Fail supporters to put them rather than party colleagues at the top of their list. It may be a form of democracy, but it promotes internecine warfare within political parties. Perhaps the Liberal Democrats wish that on the rest of us, but we can see the system's failings.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey says that the system gives choice within parties, and quotes the example of voters who might want to choose more women candidates or trade unionists, or perhaps a friend of theirs. If that were the only effect of STV it might have something to recommend it, but we know what happens in practice. The effect of the choice given to voters through STV, whereby essentially one can vote for only one candidate at a time in a multi-member constituency, is that people choose the candidate whose view is closest to theirs. The result is that candidates on the left or right wing of a party do better than those in the centre because they attract votes from supporters of other political parties. The effect of that can be seen all too clearly in Ireland.

Thus the second main failing of the STV system is that it blurs the distinction between political parties. What is the ideological distinction between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael? In the United States, the primary system blurs the distinction between political parties because it has the effect of turning a first-past-the-post system into another form of STV. People appear to be given a choice between parties and, within parties, between candidates. The inevitable result is that, within parties, there is competition between candidates of the same party and opposition parties attempt to steal votes from the other parties.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I know that the hon. Gentleman has had a long interest in this subject, and he makes some good points. May I put the counter argument? There is sometimes a benefit to the elector in candidates of the same party identifying themselves with local issues. It roots candidates within the local community, and prevents them from becoming too abstract.

The hon. Gentleman must be wary of taking Ireland as a example of where the differences are small. Unlike in most other European Union member countries, the party divide in Ireland has traditionally not been a left-right divide: it is based on nationalism and republicanism. The differences often have more to do with personality than with political philosophy. The other European countries that have proportional systems have not had that same confusion of party caused by a proportional electoral system.

Mr. Linton: It is true that the experience of Malta, which is the only other European country with that system, is very different. It has a much higher turnout. However, Maltese politics are a completely different kettle of fish, and family loyalties play an enormous part—even more so than in Ireland. Unfortunately, there are not enough exemplars of STV in Europe to show what would happen in this country, but they can warn us of the consequences.

The hon. Gentleman's comments about the experience in Ireland bring me to the third main failing of STV. The failing of many proportional systems is that they take Members of Parliament away from direct reliance on their voters and make them less involved with their constituency. Under some systems, there are no recognisable constituencies. The fault of STV lies in the other direction. It is difficult to believe that one could go too far in that direction, but one has only to look at Irish politics to see that many TDs are in their constituencies for a majority of the time and pay only occasional visits to the Dail in Dublin.

It is ridiculous that a TD for Sligo spent his whole time campaigning for an international airport in his constituency. As a monument to STV, there is now an international airport in County Sligo. STV encourages an enormously parochial approach to politics, so its failing is the reverse of most other PR systems. Nevertheless, it is a failing. One of the most important aspects of an electoral system should be that it establishes representatives who have solid roots in the constituency, and enables those representatives to devote time to what they are elected to do, which is to represent their constituencies in Parliament and to take part in decisions about the running of the country. STV has failed to do that, at least in Ireland.

We should resist the siren voices of the Liberal Democrats, who alone have held the STV flag aloft. The STV system has always been rejected in this country for good reasons. The Scottish convention considered it, but rejected it and adopted an additional member system. The Welsh also adopted an additional member system. I am sure that, if we had had a convention in London, we would have gone through the same arguments and come to the same conclusion. Indeed, the Green Paper tried to reproduce that process, and the same arguments were deployed by the Liberal Democrats and others. The result was the same as it was in Scotland and Wales, and it was decided that London should elect a mayor by a majoritarian system, but that the representatives should be elected by AMS.

I hear what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey says about leaving the door open to alternative vote plus. Powerful arguments will be made about that when the time comes, because it is a more recent development than the Green Paper or the White Paper. The Minister should examine that system, because it would have a great advantage. For example, London voters who vote Labour for their constituency representative in the assembly would not have to think about voting in another way in the second election. There would be no need for the tactical voting that bedevils our present system.

The most important thing is that we adopt the basic system proposed in the Bill. I have no problem with the closed list, and we must remember that every London voter will have a choice of candidates in his or her local constituency from whom to elect a local representative. The purpose of the 11 top-up members is to correct the anomalies created, inevitably, by any kind of majoritarian system, so that the representation across the whole of London more accurately reflects the parties' strength. It would be confusing one with the other if we tried to transport the choice of candidate into the other system; it would simply detract from what is essentially a correcting mechanism that requires a choice of party. Independents, of course, will still be able to stand.

[Mr. Linton]

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) holds on fast to the first-past-the-post system. She overlooks the fact that the mayor will be elected by a majoritarian system; not by first past the post, but a better majoritarian system—the supplementary vote, which will remove the need for tactical voting and will ensure that the mayor has the support of a majority of the voters, or very close to a majority. We will not run the risk of elections where three candidates split the vote and one wins by gaining 36 per cent. I do not understand why the Conservatives should hang on to such a system when a far-superior majoritarian system is on offer.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk said that the constituency members should also be elected by first past the post, but she fails to understand that an assembly elected in the same way as the mayor would provide no checks whatever on the mayor. The mayor is elected by a majoritarian system. It would be pointless to reproduce such a system for the assembly. We would end up with a mayor of one party and an assembly almost entirely composed of members of the same party, which would serve little purpose. The whole idea of having an assembly is that the mayor has executive power, but that scrutiny and checks are exercised by an assembly intended to more closely reflect the political make-up of the voters.

The voters will still have complete power to hire or fire the executive through the mayoral elections, by a majoritarian system. What we do not need is to reproduce all the failings of our present voting system twice over by having the constituencies elected entirely by first past the post.

Mr. Forth: What we have here, I fear, is a muddle produced by the Government's need to rush into these matters without having thought them through properly. Given all the Green Papers and the other documents that we have had—to give the Government some credit—one might have thought that we would have had a better result. Regrettably, that is not so.

I hope that we will have a chance in Committee to debate the subject of the directly elected mayor, because I am still waiting to hear, not only from the Government, but from my own colleagues, what that is all about and how it will work—more of which, perhaps, later. The difficulty arises from the combination of the election of the mayor and the assembly with the completely experimental electoral approach, which fails on almost every count of desirability.

The first failure is that of the list, which will be new and relatively incomprehensible to most of the voters in London. It has all the other disadvantages of the closed list, which we need not rehearse yet again. However, we have just heard from the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton)—almost for the first time in the Chamber—a Labour Member of Parliament who is prepared to endorse and support the closed list. That has perhaps made this evening worth while, if nothing else has. It will go down as a little moment of history in our Committee.

9.15 pm

The difficulty is that the experimental new system that produces the constituency members will fail another of the basic tests of electoral desirability, because the constituencies will be so big and so removed from the voters that there will be very little connection between the electors and the elected. Voters will have little connection with the London members on the list and I would argue that they can hardly be expected to have much connection with the constituency members.

The constituencies will be rather akin to European constituencies, and how many of us would claim that voters have any connection—intimate, knowledgeable or otherwise—with their Members of the European Parliament? That, however, is the system that is proposed for the representation of London voters in vital strategic decisions. Before we even get off first base, there are real problems in the Government's approach, because the system in no way measures up to what one would expect of a proper electoral system.

It gets worse, because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) said, when the members elected by this rather bizarre scheme arrive in the assembly chamber, they will inevitably fall into two classes: those who will claim an association with their constituencies, however large and amorphous, and those on the list, who will have some claim to represent the whole of London, but only through the prism or viewfinder of their party. We will have a peculiar assembly consisting of members elected in different ways and, inevitably, with different perspectives and a different status.

Worse even than that, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, there will be no majority in the assembly. Some may argue—the hon. Gentleman implied this—that it will be a virtue if the assembly is not dominated by any one political party. I have some experience of a democratic institution without a stable majority. I make a confession to this secret and private meeting that for five years, I was an elected Member of the European Parliament. I do not want that to be held unduly against me, and I have been trying to live it down ever since.

That experience taught me several lessons. The one that is relevant to this debate is that the institution suffers from not having an in-built party majority. We have seen an example of that very recently, I submit. The problem is that majorities vary, not only from issue to issue, but from time to time; there is no continuity of purpose or thrust in the institution so it loses its way on almost every issue.

The great danger is that the assembly will suffer the same fate. In my view, it is likely to be ineffective because of the proposed system of election and the fact that it will almost certainly not have a party majority, especially when it is placed in an adversarial position with the mayor, as the hon. Member for Battersea said, and has to provide a check and balance.

I fear that the assembly will be politically less effective as a result of not having a party majority and that a skilful mayor will be able to pick off issues and play members off against one another, thus, at worst, rendering the assembly completely ineffective as a check or balance on the mayor's activities. Surely, on any analysis, that would be a denial of the Government's intentions—as I understand them from all their arguments—for the authority as a whole and for the relationship between the mayor and the assembly. We seem to be getting the worst of all possible worlds in terms of transparency, comprehensibility to the people of London, accountability

or predictability of the outcome of elections. On none of the normal tests that one would wish to apply to an electoral system or a political decision-making body does the system measure up. That is a powerful indictment of the Bill.

I do not believe that the multiplicity of solutions offered by the Liberal Democrats would repair any of the Bill's grievous shortcomings, and that is why I support my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk. Whatever the shortcomings of first past the post—and it has some—it is at least understandable to the people of the UK and London. It provides predictability, stability and continuity that will be extremely desirable, especially during the early experimental phase of the new form of government for London.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Does the right hon. Gentleman hold the view that the good old first-past-the-post system is a better way to select someone to represent a constituency than the alternative vote system? No one can argue that AV is complicated, and it provides a member for the constituency who commands the support of a majority of the voters. The right hon. Gentleman will recall that some Members have been elected to the House with a share of the vote as low as 25 or 26 per cent. in recent years.

Mr. Forth: I understand that argument, but I have never entirely gone along with it. The idea that someone has the support of the majority once votes have been moved around, shuffled and prioritised does not hold good. The strength of the first-past-the-post system is that everyone understands it clearly, and they accept good times and bad.

The hon. Gentleman—uncharacteristically—suggested to my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk that the Conservatives should favour whatever electoral system we imagine might benefit us most in some future political environment. That is a shoddy argument, and it was unworthy of the hon. Gentleman. It appears that the hon. Member for Battersea wishes to come to his rescue.

Mr. Linton: Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us why the Conservative party does not use the first-past-the-post system to elect its leader?

Mr. Forth: That is a very good question, and I should like to hear the answer to it myself. I certainly favour a first-past-the-post system for that election, but I lost the argument on that. It may be that my party will live rather to regret the way in which it decided to go. We shall unfortunately learn that only at some time in the very distant future, so we need not concern ourselves with it for some considerable time; the hon. Member for Battersea should not hold his breath.

Mr. Hughes: I sensed something of a recovery operation in the last few words from the right hon. Gentleman.

When I intervened on the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), I was not arguing that the Conservative party should adopt the system that most benefits it. My argument was that we should have a system under which if 25 per cent. of Londoners vote Conservative, a fair representation results. I am not bothered about what the Tory party thinks, but I am bothered about what the electors think.

Mr. Forth: That is a familiar argument, and it is, in its way, perfectly fair. My difficulty with that analysis is that it is always dangerous to try to make judgments about electoral systems on the basis of what one imagines people will do when the election takes place. We all know that political opinion is often extremely volatile, and that much can change in a short time. To advocate a system that may reflect what we would like—or, even, what we would fear—is a dangerous approach.

From my experience in the political business, I do not detect that the electors necessarily feel particularly cheated, as the hon. Gentleman suggests. I do not think that he has heard any great complaints yet from the Conservative party, or even from voters in Scotland and Wales that they feel cheated because they do not have any Conservative Members of Parliament. Even if that were the case, it is one of the prices that one pays for the many other benefits of a first-past-the-post electoral system. On balance, these things are judgments and our judgment—that of the majority of Conservative Members—is that first past the post has many more virtues than vices and shortcomings.

Mr. Hughes: This is an important argument, but I shall be brief as I do not want to delay other hon. Members. There are two remaining snags in the right hon. Gentleman's analysis. First, he is wrong to say that people do not resent the fact that they are carved out of representation, although a large number of them voted for a certain party. For example, in Liverpool and other big cities where there has been no Conservative representation for years, people resent the fact that their voice is not being heard. It is strange to argue that there is not a large voice and that people are therefore content not to have representation. For example, if Tory voters in Scotland where there are no Tory Members are content, it says little for the representation that they had before.

Mr. Forth: That is a matter for them.

I must reinforce an argument that emerged during an earlier brief exchange with the hon. Gentleman and I hope that we will not forget or lose sight of this rather worrisome aspect. I hope that the Minister will take up this point and tell us if we have it wrong or if there is something that we should know that is not obvious from reading the Bill.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey advocates individual candidates and I am sure that most hon. Members want some to come through the process and take their place in the assembly, as I do. Clause 11 concerns the filling of vacancies and states that if the office of a London member becomes vacant,

> "If the London member was returned as an individual candidate . . . the vacancy, shall remain unfilled",

which seems totally unsatisfactory from almost every point of view. I hope that I can be reassured that I am wrong and that the Minister will tell me that vacancies will not remain unfilled. If they do, people will be unrepresented and the assembly will miss the opportunity to reflect possible changes in political opinion.

[Mr. Forth]

The Bill then goes on to state that, where there is a list, if someone resigns or dies the next person on the list will move up. I suppose that we must accept that as an almost inevitable result of the list approach. However, it gives rise to an interesting question, which has always fascinated me and to which even the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey did not seem to have an answer.

This possibility should not be dismissed as totally unlikely. If we have a party list, the top five candidates are elected and a series of mishaps or resignations—even a mass resignation—follows, there may well come a time when no one is left on the list to fill successive vacancies during the term of the assembly. We would then be in the peculiar and anomalous position of having a series of unfilled vacancies.

To reduce the argument to absurdity, and its logical conclusion, one might find that there were an increasing number of unfilled vacancies in the assembly. To the extent to which that is at least a possibility, I hope that the Minister will find some way to reassure us that he has some magical solution. Reading clause 11 of the Bill, one is driven to the conclusion that it is a possibility and it is not reassuring for the people of London, who are being dragged into this experiment by the Government when only 70 per cent. of one third of them turned out to support it—underwhelming support indeed.

There is still a lot of work to be done. I hope that it goes without saying that I support the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk. We need much more explanation from the Government before Conservatives will be even half convinced that this is any sort of way to go ahead with this new approach to the governance of Greater London.

9.30 pm

Mr. McNulty: I hope that the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) will forgive me if I do not dwell on her amendments, not least because, as she said, they are fairly meaningless because of the way in which they have been bunched. They would leave us with 14 directly elected members in an assembly of 14; it may be more than that. I am sure that the way that they are bunched does not reflect what was intended.

I shall not ask to be forgiven for saying that I shall ignore the sad ramblings of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). They were irrelevant, so there is nothing to respond to.

I shall concentrate on what I would call, without reservation and without intending to offend, the dogmatic self-interest wrapped in treacle of the Liberal Democrats. They did not say what the assembly is for, what it is trying to do, what its strategic functions are, and then ask what would be the most appropriate electoral system. Instead, we heard the usual rant about how single transferable vote is as pure as the driven snow and how we must try to fit everything else around it. That is a woeful disservice to London.

If STV does not work, we are offered a menu which says, "If you don't like that, what about AV plus? If you don't like that, how about this?" Everything on this stinky little menu is unpalatable and unworthy. We are talking about something as fundamental and important in London's development as the establishment of the Greater London assembly while the Liberal Democrats hold another seminar on their buddhist mantra of electoral reform. Given what London needs, there is no justification for that.

The Liberal Democrats are not alone. The Electoral Reform Society's little ditty runs in similar vain. It says that STV is wonderful because

"it will extend voter choice".

It has not anywhere where it has been implemented. The pure STV system does not work anywhere.

Mr. Simon Hughes: What about Ireland?

Mr. McNulty: I shall come back to Ireland in a moment.

The ERS states that STV would

"ensure the accountability of all Assembly Members as all would be elected on the basis of their personal votes".

That is facile and says nothing. I got 32,000 personal votes; I dare anyone to say that I got less. I know that they were not; others do not. That means nothing. The ERS says:

"STV would produce a broadly proportional Assembly without the need for two categories of Assembly Member."

That is not proven, not least because of the Irish context.

This may sound daft but I fully support STV in the Irish Republic because it is appropriate to its body politic. Outside Dublin, Ireland is a disparate, rural land. The quota for seats is no more than 7,500. Within the multi-member seats, there is county bias at each end of a constituency. That is appropriate because it means that a sparse rural community will be served well in the Dail by its Teachta Dala.

It is the same in Dublin because despite its spread, it is a morass of little villages and communities that is served by STV in a way that, in an Irish context, first past the post would not. However, STV is not, in an Irish context, proportional. As the Irish electorate becomes more and more volatile, they get TDs who do not have the quota and get in because they just managed to survive in last place. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) told the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst—I suppose that I have to say that—that 25 or 26 per cent. can be sufficient to get a candidate elected in a diverse first-past-the-post constituency. That happens but it happens with increasing regularity in the pure STV system that he is so fond of in the Irish Republic. More and more often, in every constituency johnny-last-in gets elected, with no quota at all, but—this might sound familiar—as the repository of every protest vote scraped up so that he can stay in. That brings us back to Liberal self-interest, which is what the amendment is all about.

During the previous debate, the point was well made that it is incumbent on us to ensure that the Greater London assembly reflects the inclusivity of London's rich and varied society. That will not, as if by magic, happen if we use STV, AV-plus or any other proportional system; nor will it happen if we utilise the system set out in the Bill. It happens—here comes the standard Liberal cop-out—where political parties have the will to make sure that it happens. It is incumbent on all the parties in

London to ensure that their candidates for both the 14 directly elected seats and the 11 list seats reflect the gender balance and the rich cultural diversity of London.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey suggested that using STV will ensure that a trade unionist will be elected here, a woman there and a black or Asian candidate somewhere else. That is facile and abject nonsense that simply hides the self-interest that is always nakedly present beneath the Liberal Democrats piety, as they deliver the latest sermon on STV from the pulpit. It is complete nonsense.

Electoral systems have to be horses for courses. If the additional member system or the hybrid version is appropriate for the London assembly, the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly, that is fine by us, because we start by asking, "What are those bodies for?" and then ask, "What electoral system will best reflect those functions and serve the community?" We do not aim for the purity of the Liberal Democrats' approach.

I am polite, so I tried not to snigger when the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey suggested that AV-plus has new legitimacy because of the Jenkins commission report. I have to say, with the best will in the world, that AV-plus, to paraphrase one of the hon. Gentleman's ex-colleagues, will probably be strangled at birth, because of Jenkins; it will die before it ever rears its ugly head because of Jenkins. Despite the report's sweet, literary style, probably resulting from its having been written in a haze of claret, the Jenkins commission got it wrong.

I am not a first-past-the-post Luddite, either in a London context or more broadly; nor am I an STV or PR evangelist. Show me what the architecture of government is about and what it is supposed to represent, then tell me how the electoral system best enables the community to get what it needs from that architecture. You have not done that—sorry, Mr. Martin: the Liberal Democrats have not done that. The Conservatives certainly have not done it either, but we shall put that down to the selection of amendments. We could probably have had a more interesting debate on their amendments—they would still have been wrong, but we could have gone into greater detail had the Conservatives managed to table their amendments in proper order.

The Liberal Democrats have not started with the 14-11 split of the constituencies as they stand in the Bill, nor by telling us how that is wrong within the context of what is sought from the assembly, but that is the question they have to answer. We do not want boy scout stuff about PR from the Liberal Democrats, nor Luddite stuff about first past the post from the Conservatives. They have not told us how the two aspects—the architecture and the electoral system—marry together.

This is not a little debating chamber where someone can get good marks and go to the top of the class—that is the Liberal conference, which is held only once a year. The issues at stake are real: after the elections, the Greater London authority will have a real impact on the people of London, whom we all purport to represent, so mess with it at your peril. We do not want the GLA to suffer because the high priests of PR or the Luddites want to play games.

What is in the Bill is right and we must stick with it. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) to close the door completely and not to entertain any alternative electoral system. This is London's reality and we should get on with it.

Mrs. Lait: The last time I followed the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) in this place we were discussing commerce. On this occasion, I suggest that the Government Whips might like to take the hon. Gentleman aside to explain that, although we shall vote on the Conservative amendments later, he is perfectly free to discuss them now. However, I would hate to give the hon. Gentleman a lesson on procedure.

Before I speak in support of the Conservative amendments, I have a few words for the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who was rather hopeful that the Leader of the Opposition might be coming around to the hon. Gentleman's point of view regarding electoral reform. However, I have a copy of a speech that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition gave tonight and the hon. Gentleman might appreciate hearing a quote from it. It states:

"Another threat from Labour's programme of constitutional change is that the link between the governed and the government, which has been an historic strength of our institutions, could be severed.

Our first-past-the-post voting system provides that link because the British people know who is responsible for new laws and taxes, and they do something about it if they do not like them—they can kick the government out."

I am sorry, but I must point out that the hon. Gentleman's hopes have been dashed. I left the House at the last election as a result of the will of the people and was rapidly returned as a result of our first-past-the-post system. That would not have happened if we had operated any form of proportional representation system. Therefore, I have a definite personal interest in maintaining first past the post. I have long envisaged many problems with proportional representation, one of which was mentioned earlier this evening.

I would like the Minister to respond to some specific points. We oppose the idea of the additional member—or London member in the context of the Bill. Given that European Union citizens who are resident in London will be eligible to vote, could one of them stand for election to the London assembly? The Minister is nodding assent, so we can add that to the list of potential representative groups suggested by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. We look forward to seeing European citizens representing Londoners in the assembly.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) spoke about his experiences in the European Parliament. One result of the list system in the European Parliament is that someone very prominent heads the list in order to give some identity to the other faceless characters on the list who have been chosen by the party. When the elections are over, the prominent person disappears and everyone else moves up one place. In that way the real leader of the group in Parliament emerges and Members from the bottom of the list enter Parliament. Unless the Bill is amended, I assume that that could happen in this case.

I do not plan to serve on the Committee that will consider the Bill—that is a source of great sadness to me, but I am not volunteering my services. However, some technical questions must be answered before anyone—particularly the people of London who will have to work with it—can make a sensible judgment about the value of the system. Anyone in Bromley who talks to me about this subject—I must admit that it is not a topic of

[Mrs. Lait]

conversation on an hourly or daily basis—cannot comprehend other than voting for the first-past-the-post system. The people of Bromley do not like any form of proportional representation, and I agree with them.

9.45 pm

Mr. Raynsford: This has been an interesting debate, which concluded with a rather sad insight into the point of view of the electors of Bromley, who, according to their representative, are incapable of considering any possible change in the electoral system. I think more highly of the Bromley electorate, which I am sure is interested in possible alternatives to systems that have been tried for years.

I reassure the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) that under this country's local government electoral law it is possible for a European citizen resident in London—residence in London is essential—to vote in local elections and to stand for election to local government. That provision will not change for elections to the Greater London authority.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) opened the debate by expressing a reasonable concern that the new system of government should work. We accept that it is innovative. We are committed to ensuring that it works. She talked about the need for decisive and effective government, and we are determined to achieve that. The mayor will be elected by a system that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) described as a superior majoritarian system that will guarantee a clear majority and a decisive mandate.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk expressed concern about the departure from constituency representation. However, we are ensuring a strong, but not exclusive, constituency element in the new framework. As she knows, there will be 14 members representing constituencies. There will be other members, but a strong constituency element will remain, which we think is right.

The right hon. Lady argued for first past the post, essentially on two grounds: the ability of the electorate to hire and fire the authority or government and the need for a clear constituency link. I have already established that we shall have a clear constituency link. On hiring and firing, the mayor will be the executive. The supplementary vote system will enable the electorate decisively to reject a mayor whom they do not want to keep in place and, conversely, to elect with a good majority a mayor in whom they have confidence. That will in no way interrupt the process of hiring and firing; it will ensure accountability, which is the right hon. Lady's objective.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) seemed semi-detached on this issue. I fear that during the proceedings we shall discover a suspicion on his part even about having a mayor, which the rest of his party now believes is a good idea. I look forward to hearing his views on that. He expressed concern about having two classes of member: a constituency member and a London-wide member. He obviously is not familiar with the electoral systems in many American cities where some members are elected at large, to use the American term, and others are elected to represent constituencies. That is done for good reasons similar to those that we have established here—we want to ensure that there are people who can take a wide view and not simply focus on parochial issues.

I remind the right hon. Gentleman, as I did the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk, that the fact that there is not a majority on the assembly will not in any way hinder its effectiveness because the assembly is not the executive. The mayor is the executive and, by definition, the mayor will always have a majority because he or she will be elected under a majoritarian system.

The amendments in the name of the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk would remove the proportional element of the voting system that we have devised for the assembly. The GLA's purpose is to represent and promote the views and interests of all Londoners. It can best do that if the assembly is composed of members whose interests and concerns reflect those of the electorate as a whole. The additional member system that we have adopted will encourage that and allow it to happen.

The first-past-the-post system favoured by Conservative Members could easily leave whole communities or viewpoints unrepresented because they are scattered through London and not concentrated in any one of the new electoral areas that will return directly elected assembly members. The list system will give those people a hope of having a say in London's government, which we believe is right. We cannot accept the Conservative amendments and I invite the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk to withdraw them.

I turn now to the amendments in the name of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). I fear that he is beginning to take what might be described as an anorak approach to politics. The hon. Gentleman has tabled amendments suggesting different voting systems. It is difficult to be altogether sure what he really wants. Is it AV or AV-plus? Is it STV? Is it open or semi-open lists? Is it the Belgian or the d'Hondt formula? Is it single or multi-member constituencies? By way of contrast to this plethora of interesting and obscure formulas, the Government's position on how to elect the assembly is consistent and clear.

We set out clear proposals in our White Paper for assembly elections to be held under the additional member system, using first past the post for the constituency elections. This is the system adopted for elections in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. It is the system set out in the White Paper, which was well known to Londoners when they voted in the referendum; and it is the system that we intend to deliver.

Mr. Forth: Before the Minister concludes his remarks, is he going to give me even a minuscule answer to the questions that I asked about unfilled vacancies? Like the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I think that there is a problem in this regard, and the Committee would be grateful for an explanation from the Minister.

Mr. Raynsford: Those matters are dealt with in clause 11, which we are not considering tonight. I shall come to them when we debate clause 11 in Committee,

and will thus avoid being out of order this evening. I shall certainly ensure that the right hon. Gentleman gets a full answer.

Mr. Forth: But not now.

Mr. Raynsford: No; I would give a full answer now were it not out of order to do so.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey welcomed the Government's openness to reform. He regretted the lack of a consultative group to consider the electoral system in London, but acknowledged that there had been consultation on the Green Paper. Indeed, I well recall speaking to him during the consultation period when we listened carefully to his views and those of his colleagues. I appreciate his recognition of our decision, following the consultation, to operate a proportional system which should allow proper representation of London's diverse areas and communities. I hope that he will not be too disappointed that we do not accept his amendment, which would take us to the wilder shores of anorakism.

The additional member system will allow a wide range of interests and points of view to be represented. It combines a Londonwide list element, to ensure that the assembly has a strategic citywide focus, with representation from all parts of London. It is likely to deliver broadly proportional outcomes. Of course there can be debates about the intricacies of any electoral system. If the Liberal Democrats had their way, those debates would be interminable. What we are proposing is a balanced system for electing the assembly, which will deliver a body that represents London's interests. I see no reason to change our proposals.

I am not convinced that the Liberal Democrats' plans to replace our proposals for a blend of constituency and Londonwide representation with multi-member constituencies would be in London's best interest. Under our proposals, all parts of London will be represented in the assembly, working to ensure that a wide range of viewpoints from across London has a chance to be expressed. In addition, we are proposing a Londonwide component for the assembly elections, which is essential if the assembly is to have a strategic, Londonwide perspective.

If we were to adopt multi-member constituencies, the balance would be lost. There would be members for north London and some members from the south-west, but no overall Londonwide dimension. It would be necessary for the Local Government Commission to conduct a review of the constituencies and make further recommendations to the Secretary of State. That would entirely nullify all its work, which has led to the announcement that I made earlier this afternoon about the constituencies that will apply. It would also risk delaying the first GLA elections. We therefore believe that there is no case for reopening the issue.

On the specific proposals for STV and AV, I am unconvinced by the case made out by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. The main argument advanced in favour of these systems is that they enhance voter choice because voters are able to rank candidates from different parties in order of preference. The AV-plus system was recommended by the Jenkins committee, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. However, as he recognised, different systems can be adopted for different bodies. There is no reason why we should adopt the same system for different tiers of government. What Jenkins may believe is right for Westminster, he would not necessarily believe was right for other tiers of government in Scotland, Wales or London. The additional member system will give voters wide choice. A London voter will be able to vote for both a constituency candidate and a party or independent on a Londonwide basis. He or she need not choose the same party in the constituency and on the list; in my view, that represents a real choice.

Moreover, the single transferable vote would inevitably require very large constituencies—with, possibly, a million electors in each one, on the basis of the five constituencies that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey mentioned, which will not necessarily provide a good and natural area and will not necessarily make it easy for electors to identify with their candidates. If we want to have representatives who are familiar with the area and accessible to the electorate, I am not sure that a constituency with an electorate of a million voters is necessarily the right way to do it.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Battersea and for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) emphasised, STV may sound nice in the snow-white Liberal presentation, but the reality of STV as practised in certain parts of the world is very different. It may be a recipe for skulduggery and all sorts of malpractice that we do not want introduced into the political system. My hon. Friends the Members for Battersea and for Harrow, East made a forceful case for avoiding anything to do with the STV system.

On the issue of closed lists, I do not accept the argument that parties, rather than voters, will choose the 11 additional members. The order in which candidates appear on the list may well influence the voter's choice of party. Those lists will be accessible to voters in every polling station, and voters will pay attention to the identity of the leading personalities on the list.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey has tabled a series of amendments that would alter the method by which list members are elected. If those amendments were passed, voters would vote, not for a party or individual candidate, but for individual candidates on the party list—or, in the case of amendment No. 41, either an individual on the list or the party as a whole. That matter has recently been the subject of a protracted debate in another place, and I do not propose to re-open those arguments in detail today.

I shall conclude by making four key points. First, our proposals for electing the assembly were set out in the White Paper and were well publicised before Londoners went to the polls in the referendum of May 1998. I do not believe that those who argue that the Government's position on this issue is undemocratic are on secure ground.

Secondly, the system that we propose is entirely consistent with legislation recently approved by Parliament for elections to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. It would be odd if, having so recently agreed a system for those two organisations, we were to announce that we had to change the system because it was unsatisfactory for London.

Thirdly, the charge is often made that closed lists mean that voters can no longer vote for an individual, but, as I have stressed, the list is only one element, and voters in

[Mr. Raynsford]

every part of London will have an individual constituency in which they can vote on a first-past-the-post basis for their representative in that constituency. It is a balanced system, which provides the voter with a high degree of choice, enabling them to vote for both the constituency candidate and the party.

Finally, with the open-list system, which the Liberal Democrats are proposing, there is a real risk that elections would become phenomenally complex and confusing, and we do not intend to have that.

The proposals that the Government have brought before the House are clear and consistent. They will deliver a proportional assembly, which combines a Londonwide perspective with geographical representation from all parts of London. They give voters genuine choice. They are relatively simple for electors and administrators to operate—a significant advantage over some of the alternatives proposed today. With that in mind, I ask the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey to withdraw their amendments.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I have quite a few seconds left in which to speak. The Minister is obviously not yet persuaded. We propose a system that produces one type of assembly member; he wants two. We propose a system that has a more representative assembly member; his system has a less representative one. We want open lists; he wants closed lists. We believe that the case is made, and we should like to press amendment No. 19 to the vote. We believe that we are right.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 44, Noes 461.

Division No. 39] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gorrie, Donald
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Swinney, John
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Don Foster.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brazier, Julian
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burns, Simon
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Colvin, Michael
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gale, Roger
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher

Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leigh, Edward
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lock, David
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNulty, Tony
Macdaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Madel, Sir David
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malins, Humfrey
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mosa, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prior, David
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Speller, John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Streeter, Gary
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Viggers, Peter
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey

Wood, Mike
Wooley, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony (Cannock)
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Hanson and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

Committee report progress: to sit again tomorrow.

DEREGULATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1)(a) (Consideration of draft deregulation orders),

PIPE-LINES

That the draft Deregulation (Pipe-Lines) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 30th November 1998, be approved.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My point of order is simple: it will not have escaped your notice that over two thirds of hon. Members of this House have just voted against a complete proportional representation system for any election.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Hon. Members are entitled to vote as they please.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(4) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

MENTAL HEALTH ACT 1983

That the Mental Health Act 1983 Code of Practice be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES

Ordered,

That Sir Alastair Goodlad be discharged from the Committee on Standards and Privileges and Mr. Eric Forth be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.17 pm

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue that is important, not only for my constituents, but for all right hon. and hon. Members. Britain can be proud of its commitment to victims of crime. It is not universally understood that we pay out more to those who have had their lives damaged, and sometimes ruined, due to crimes committed against them or members of their family than any other European country—indeed, more than our European partners put together.

That reflects the compassion and the natural justice ingrained within our society. The principle underpinning criminal injuries compensation is that it is an expression of public sympathy and support for the innocent victim.

I was a social worker in Kent before being elected to the House, and I have experience of assisting abused children in making claims for compensation. The legal team working for Kent county council is held up as a beacon of excellence by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority for the way in which it processed claims on behalf of the children in its care.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Department will reply to the debate. He has a highly regarded reputation and his commitment to vulnerable people was evident to me in his previous work, particularly at the Department of Health.

In the light of the review that the Government are holding, I shall address some of the issues relating to criminal injuries compensation. I am pleased to be joined by my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) and for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who hope to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

When changes were introduced a few years ago, they were not universally welcomed. However, there was consensus that, although payments would be less under a tariff scheme than through the previous system, the new claims would be processed much more speedily. From my experience of dealing with constituents, I know that it has been frustrating that some people claimed under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board, not under the authority. Many cases wait and wait, letters are not answered and files have been lost. Indeed, one constituent has been waiting eight years for a final settlement.

I have noted from written answers from the board's chairman, the noble Lord Carlisle, that additional members have been appointed to the board and that progress is being made with the backlog. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can assure me this evening that he is monitoring the board's progress and will take steps if it appears to him that the board is unlikely to meet the required level of progress to clear the backlog by March 2000, as agreed.

Even under the tariff scheme, victims can wait a year for a response. Thousands of cases go on to review and then appeal. We should look at how the system could be improved and speeded up. A high proportion of sexual violence cases are turned down at the initial and the review stages because the authority cannot make a

decision based on papers alone. For example, where a successful defence of consent in a rape trial results in acquittal, there is a conflict of evidence between the applicant and the offender and the case can be settled only at a hearing. The only way for applicants then to make progress is to appeal. However, that is after they have been told in writing by the authority that it is not satisfied that the injuries are the result of a crime.

Hon. Members will understand that that is extremely distressing because, at that stage, the victim is unsure whether the decision that has been reached is a result of conflict, of lack of evidence or of the fact that the authority simply does not believe him or her. In such circumstances, an alternative might be for the panel to advise the victim that it cannot decide on the paper evidence and that it will make a request for an immediate initial hearing. That would speed up the process and give the victim the comfort that the case was at least being given fair consideration.

All hon. Members will know of hideous crimes committed on their constituents and the impact that they have had. It seems wrong that we give compensation and then assess people's means for benefits, which can then be taken it away. I am aware that people have the option of opening a trust, but the amount of money that can go into a trust that can be used freely is limited. There are also solicitors' fees for setting up trusts, not to mention the issue of the liberty to spend one's money as one sees fit.

There are examples of pensioners who have been mugged losing council tax benefit. I have worked with children who have suffered the worst forms of sexual abuse. They have had their income stopped because of an award. That cannot be right and it does not sit comfortably with the spirit of the scheme. Victims of crime should be treated as a special case. It is unjust that the less well-off lose their benefit entitlement because compensation has been awarded for a crime from which they have suffered. Has my hon. Friend considered speaking to the Secretary of State for Social Security on this matter?

My next concern is that a number of victims have had their claims rejected because they have failed to report a crime to the police or have not co-operated with the police. Between 1990 and 1998, there were some 38,000 cases in this category, representing 24 per cent. of all cases. The representative bodies advise me that they are seeing an increase in that instance. Unison, my union, cites an example in which a hospital worker was viciously attacked by a psychiatric patient. She did not notify the police for five weeks because she did not know that she could claim. She did not know about the criminal injuries compensation scheme until her union representative told her about it. She then filed a claim, but it was not accepted because she had not co-operated with the police.

Public sector service workers, particularly in the caring professions, are often reluctant to report assaults by clients to the police because they regard it—wrongly, in my view—as part of the job. Moreover, police involvement can also bring perceived difficulties to the client-worker relationship, particularly in the residential setting. Under the old scheme, the requirement to report incidents to the police was not so strict. Will my hon. Friend consider building in more flexibility in that regard?

Some employees believe that they are discouraged from notifying the police of such assaults to avoid bad publicity. It would also be helpful if the Minister could comment on that.

I hope that, under the review, the Minister will consider the 28-week rule for special earnings. Public service workers are often vulnerable because they face violence at work. They may be back at work before 28 weeks. As well as the loss of earnings, they may incur large bills as a consequence of their injury. Replacement teeth and glasses are common and costly expenses.

We should be proud of our compensation scheme. It was reluctantly accepted that the tariff system should operate, but the flip side was greater efficiency. There has been more efficiency and claims are processed more quickly. The rates were set in 1994, based on rates discussed in 1993, and they have not increased since. I hope that my hon. Friend will tell us that the Government want to increase the tariffs—perhaps not at this stage but at some point in the future—in line with prices.

The upper limit should be lifted in extreme cases. I have noted the Home Secretary's comments that there is a desire to increase payments, especially in sexual attacks. I am sure that we all support that. In the most extreme cases, such as tetraplegia, a family could lose everything, so the award should be greater than the current limit of £500,000.

There is always fierce competition for extra resources. I have made a pitch this evening, but I make no apology for that. I want an improvement in the help given to those who, through no fault of their own, have had their lives destroyed by violent acts of crime.

10.27 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) on securing this debate on an important topic. I shall make a few brief remarks based on my experience, before I came into the House, as a solicitor specialising in personal injury, when I was aware of the injustices that the scheme perpetrates on many victims of crime.

We should be clear that we are talking about innocent victims. Those who have contributed to their injuries in some way have their damages reduced accordingly. Many people have done nothing to bring such injuries on themselves, but are caught up in a difficult and complex scheme that does not always meet their needs.

When the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority was introduced by the Conservative Government in April 1996, it was with the explicit aim of reducing costs. They accepted that a move from assessing damages on a common law basis to a tariff scheme would reduce many awards. The payback for that was to have been that claims would be dealt with much more speedily. My experience, and that of many of my friends working in a similar field, has been that that was not the case.

In a parliamentary answer given to me only yesterday, the Minister conceded that it was difficult to give the average times for claims being processed under the CICA, and I accept that, because cases vary widely. He said that, if the extremes of different cases were discounted, the average time for producing a first decision had dropped from nine months under the old Criminal Injuries Compensation Board to seven months under the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority.

We have paid a high price for a very small reduction. For instance, it is difficult for people to claim compensation for loss of earnings unless they have been absent from work for 28 weeks.

[Helen Jones]

In another parliamentary answer given to me yesterday by my hon. Friend the Minister, the figures show that the number of people claiming for loss of earnings has never risen higher than 0.69 per cent. of claims and has, on some occasions, been as low as 0.08 per cent. That figure does not reflect in any way the real loss of earnings that many people have suffered after a criminal injury.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford referred to the tariff scheme. As it exists, the scheme does not cope with the wide variation in the effects of sexual assaults, and needs revising in that area.

I am concerned that the quality of medical evidence obtained by the CICA is often very poor, particularly when one is dealing with cases of psychological damage. To challenge that, victims need to obtain their own medical evidence. If they are eligible for advice and assistance under the green form scheme, it is possible to persuade the Legal Aid Board to extend the green form to cover a medical report. In my experience, it is like pulling teeth to persuade the board to do so.

Most people are not eligible under that scheme, and the burden that is therefore imposed on people of very modest means—who must pay hundreds of pounds to obtain the necessary medical evidence and, in some cases, must obtain several medical reports from different specialists—is quite intolerable. They are suffering a second time after having been the victim of a crime.

The Government have done much to provide support for victims of crime, and to protect vulnerable people. I hope that, in looking at this matter, the Minister will take on board the deficiencies in the scheme and come up with something that enables people to claim adequate compensation, including compensation for loss of earnings and other expenses that they have incurred. At the moment, our victims of crime are treated much worse—and gain much less compensation—than those who engage in civil litigation for injuries that they have received. That cannot be a sensible or tolerable scheme.

10.32 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) on securing the debate, and thank him for allowing me some time to contribute. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones), I was a personal injury lawyer before coming to this place. I dealt with many hundreds of claims involving the criminal injuries scheme—not the least of which was taking on the previous Government in the House of Lords on judicial review when they tried to produce a scheme that was found to be illegal, and which, ultimately, was replaced by the current scheme. In opposition, I was fortunate enough to be able to advise the current Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), on that measure. At the time, we highlighted a number of faults with the scheme.

In the short time available to me, I shall go through some of my shopping list of faults. After the election, I submitted a paper to the Home Office with some suggestions for improvements to the scheme. One of the problems with the previous review was that it failed to address the issue of eligibility. The rules have hardly changed since 1964, when the original scheme was introduced, and it is high time that we had another look at them. We should do so with particular reference to domestic violence because the domestic circumstances that give rise to domestic violence claims often no longer fit the rather strict eligibility criteria. We also need to look at the position of those who have unrelated or spent convictions, who could still be penalised when making a claim to the board.

There are problems with the tariff scheme, some of which have been highlighted in the debate. There is a strong case for taking psychological injury and injuries sustained by victims of sex offences outside the parameters of the tariff scheme, because I do not think that many of those injuries are susceptible to reduction to a simple tariff system. Similarly with multiple injuries, the percentages do not do justice to the injuries of many victims.

There are problems generally with a fixed-tariff scheme, and there are alternatives in the form of a matrix or banding which would not cost more but would, potentially, produce a fairer result. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford referred to inflation, and the tariff is based on research that was originally carried out in 1992. The original intention was to uprate the scheme every three years. So far, we are still working with those somewhat out-of-date figures. This March or April, the Law Commission will publish a paper on levels of damages in personal injury claims. Perhaps when that is available, we can consider how the tariff scheme operates and whether the figures are a fair reflection of proper expectations.

Another problem is limitation, which was reduced to two years in the new tariff, as opposed to the normal common-law system of three years. We need to consider that with particular reference to children, because the limitation period runs from the date of injury, not the date of the achievement of the age of majority, which is the normal system in common law. I understand that the Law Commission is also to publish a paper in August on the law of limitation.

I share the sense of injustice of the families of people who were killed by murder or manslaughter who were not dependent on the victims of those homicides. They have lost out in the hiatus caused by the chaos of the reintroduction of the 1990 scheme. The 200 families should have had compensation of £10,000 but they had their applications dismissed. They would have qualified again under the reintroduced scheme, and the Government should redress the injustice. It would not cost much and I think that it could be done within the scheme's existing cash limits.

There is a cap on payments for injuries of maximum severity. Unfortunately, the scheme requires claimants to jump through hoops and prove the value of their claim with expert reports. That can significantly eat into the value of the claim. Claims can be many hundreds of thousands of pounds over the cap, and I hope that we can devise a system that does not make tetraplegics, for instance, effectively waste money to prove the value of their claims.

10.37 pm

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. Paul Boateng): This has been an interesting and well-informed debate. The House will be grateful to my hon. Friend the

Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) for giving us the opportunity to reflect on the criminal injuries compensation scheme, which is of enormous importance to all our constituents, as our mailbags show.

This debate is timely in many ways, not least because the Government are considering whether any further changes to the scheme are necessary or desirable and, if so, whether wider consultation is needed. I hope that we will be able to make an announcement to the House soon about our intentions in that regard.

I am afraid, however, that I must disappoint my hon. Friends the Members for Chatham and Aylesford, for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) and for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who have spoken with such passion, conviction and wisdom, because I will not be able to make any such announcement tonight; but I can share with them the Government's determination to put victims at the heart of the Home Office's criminal justice policy and our response to concerns arising from the criminal actions of others.

The state is not liable for injuries caused by the acts of others, but we are determined to continue to acknowledge in some way the public sense of responsibility for and sympathy with the blameless victim. Through the criminal injuries compensation scheme, the state provides a monetary award on behalf of the whole community.

Of course, the scheme no longer seeks to provide finely judged compensation covering every head of damage that might be awarded in a successful civil suit. My hon. Friends the Members for Hendon and for Warrington, North have practised as personal injury lawyers, and they know the distinction that must exist between a statutory scheme with limited purposes and the full weight of a civil justice system in which claims may be tested, and in which the victim is free, if the attacker is known, to bring an action. That right remains: the criminal injuries compensation scheme represents some extra public recognition of the harm suffered by a blameless victim.

There is no right sum of money to compensate a victim for the pain suffered as a result of a criminal injury. Any amount is, to some extent, arbitrary. As a result of experience of the scheme over a number of years, we have concluded that the tariff scheme represents the right approach. It is straightforward and transparent. It is simple for victims to understand, from the start they have a good idea of how much money they are likely to receive, and they receive that money more quickly than under the old scheme.

Hon. Members write to me in such numbers that I cannot but understand their concern to make sure that the scheme works as efficiently as possible. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority is doing a good job in clearing claims under the new tariff scheme. To date, it has issued a first decision within 12 months in 85 per cent. of cases. The new appeals system is also proving faster. We cannot be complacent about progress, but I am glad that it is being made.

Cases are being listed more quickly, and many applicants or their representatives are in the rather unusual position of having to request adjournments because they have not had time to prepare their cases. That is never a pleasant position for an advocate, as my hon. Friends will know, but it indicates the success of our measures.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for underlining continuing concerns about the need to settle rapidly residual common law damages cases, some of which are proving particularly complex and demanding. In those cases, applicants are having to ask for adjournments in order to prepare their cases more fully, and it is difficult, once a hearings place is lost, to fill another at short notice. All that adds to the backlog, but we are determined to ensure that the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority meets its target of clearing old cases by 31 March 2000.

As for the way forward, my hon. Friends have highlighted the concerns of their constituents about the scheme. I should make it clear that there is no prospect of a return to the common law damages scheme, or indeed to one based on individual assessment. That would increase unacceptably the cost of compensation and administration. In any compensation scheme that is dependent on public funds, there will always need to be that balance between the needs of the victim and the interests of the taxpayer. There will always be an argument as to where the balance lies.

As we consider the way forward for a possible review of the scheme, I undertake that, whatever the decision, I will continue to ensure that my office is open, and officials are available, to hon. Members on both sides of the House so that they can continue to make their input into ensuring that the scheme is one in which we as a nation are entitled to take some pride. After all, it is the most generous scheme in the world. It pays out more compensation than all the other countries in Europe added together—more than £200 million in 1997-98 alone and about £2 billion since the scheme started.

It is right that that should be the case. We must put the victim of crime first. We shall continue to do so—all the victims of crime, including public servants—and I assure the House that this debate has been a useful input into informing our decisions as to the best way forward. The victim of crime has come first and will continue to do so under this Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes to Eleven o'clock

House of Commons

Wednesday 20 January 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Population and Development (Cairo Conference)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

9.33 am

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): The Cairo conference held in 1994 was an enormously significant event, as 180 nations gathered together to sign a declaration of commitment to put human rights at the centre of reproductive health. Since Cairo, the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and, most important, to have the information and means to do so has been accepted, thus giving people the right to attain higher standards of sexual and reproductive health.

We are, however, a long way from realising that ideal. More than 580,000 women—99 per cent. of them live in developing countries—die each year as a result of pregnancy or childbirth. It is estimated that about 20 million unsafe abortions occur each year, resulting in about 70,000 deaths and millions of disabilities. At any one moment, 120 women who do not want to get pregnant do so for lack of access to contraception. Each year, between 15 million and 19 million young girls give birth. Between 100 million and 132 million women and girls have been subjected to female genital mutilation. More than 30 million people live with HIV/AIDS, the vast majority of them—85 per cent.—in Africa or Asia. That is a catalogue of totally avoidable disaster.

The technology and resources to avoid such disasters are easily available and not expensive, and success in that field would mean that all people would win, wherever they live in the world, but especially women and children living in the poorest parts of the world. The hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) recently accompanied me to Nigeria, where we saw a country whose per capita income is plummeting; one of the many reasons for that is that the population is soaring. In Nepal, the population is rising rapidly and people are fleeing the hillsides because of deforestation and because those areas cannot support a growing population. In Botswana and Namibia, rapidly growing populations are making the shortage of water more acute, with waterholes drying up and people having to leave the surrounding area.

World population is surging upwards by about 78 million each year. This year, slightly more than 10 years after reaching 5 billion, the number of people will reach 6 billion. We cannot go on at that rate: population growth is the world's biggest sustainable development issue. To an overwhelming extent, that growth has occurred in the poorest parts of the world. One fact that staggers me is that, in 1900, Europe had three times the population of Africa; by 2050—150 years later—Africa will have three times the population of Europe, including Russia. Nevertheless, the greatest numerical increase will have occurred in Asia.

Because these children have already been born and because the developing world's population is so young, nothing can avert huge population growth in the near future; but the sooner the world's population is stabilised because that is what people want, the better it will be for everyone. Throughout western Europe, whether in Britain, Italy, Sweden or Spain, we choose to have small families. I want to ensure that every woman and every family in the world has the right to make the same choice.

The timing of the debate is impeccable. In February, a major forum for non-governmental organisations will be held in The Hague; and a conference of parliamentarians to assess Cairo-plus-five will take place at roughly the same time. The all-party group on population, development and reproductive health, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), has taken a prominent role in the planning of those conferences. The United Nations Commission on Population and Development meets in March; and, from 30 June to 2 July, there will be a special session of the United Nations General Assembly to consider progress since Cairo. Today's debate gives the House a chance to assess progress since Cairo, and to hear from the Government their evaluation of the progress made and their policy for the future.

Let us first address the issue of resources. The funding target agreed in Cairo in 1994 was £17 billion, of which two thirds was to be provided by developing countries and one third by developed countries. By the end of 1995, the developing countries had spent £7.5 billion on population development and reproductive health activities. Donor countries had contributed £2 billion. Those were early days post-Cairo, but in order to reach the agreed target by 2000, donor countries must increase their contributions by 23 per cent. each year.

Any funding shortfall is not academic but has profound consequences for individuals. The United Nations Fund for Population Activities has calculated that the current rate of underfunding will result in 120 million unwanted pregnancies, 49 million additional abortions, 5 million deaths of infants and young children and 65,000 maternal deaths over the years 1995 to 2000.

How is Britain doing as a nation? To their credit, the previous Government increased the amount of aid resources devoted to reproductive health. However, they did so within the restrictions of a constantly falling aid budget. The research organisation Population Aid International has evaluated the performance of all donor nations. Only the Scandinavians get A grades; we receive a B-minus. Of course, the organisation evaluated the performance of the previous Government; it did not take into account our creation of the Department for International Development or the wonderful 28 per cent. increase in DFID's aid budget following the comprehensive spending review. We have put much more energy into debt and trade issues that will help developing countries.

[Mr. Tony Worthington]

Today's debate will give the Government a chance to reaffirm our commitment to reproductive health and to commit ourselves to further development of our contribution to this field of human rights. Britain is commended for our technical expertise, and I praise the first-rate efforts of NGOs such as Marie Stopes International and Population Concern, which are respected throughout the world for their contributions. I also commend the BBC World Service and the International Planned Parenthood Federation for their highly successful "Sexwise" radio programmes that are aimed at young people. The programmes were first broadcast in south Asia, but will now go worldwide to eastern Europe, central Asia, Africa, the Americas, the Arab world and south-east Asia. Radio has enormous public education potential in countries with vast distances and poor services. I was pleased to hear from the BBC that the story in *The Observer* about reductions in the World Service is wrong and that it is planning further investment after years of cuts.

What are the Government's plans? I applaud the start made by DFID, but the Population Action International report says that the British contribution will have to treble if it is to be a fair per capita share of a fully subscribed and honoured Cairo commitment. It is particularly important that Britain should do well because of worries about the contribution of others, particularly the world's major economies. I shall mention three in particular.

The United States has the worst record of all developed nations in terms of its failure to meet the United Nations aid commitment of 0.7 per cent. of gross domestic product. It is unlikely—although I have not managed to check—that President Clinton gave a commitment to any improvement in his state of the union address yesterday. The United States appears to give a substantial amount to family planning services, but that is merely a reflection of its huge economy. The funding is extremely volatile and cannot be relied upon. It depends on who has the upper hand in Congress at a particular time.

The moral McCarthyites are uppermost at the moment and forbid any expenditure where there is even the suspicion that money is being spent on abortion. Unfortunately, in their desire to protect the unborn, those fundamentalists withhold money that would save the lives of women in childbirth. Women are killed by unsafe abortions, and countless thousands of infants and children die because of a lack of resources. It is a strange morality that kills the born so as theoretically to protect the unborn. We cannot rely on the Americans to honour their commitment to Cairo.

The Japanese are also big givers, but there must be question marks over the stability of their contribution given the turmoil in the far eastern economy. There are also doubts about how much of Japan's contribution is devoted to reproductive health as compared with general welfare. There is a trend in Japanese giving to distribute aid to neighbouring countries rather than to the areas of most need and greatest poverty. It is strange that, although the Japanese play a prominent role in international organisations that are concerned with population development and reproductive health, the pill is not available in Japan. That greatly weakens Japan's credibility in human and women's rights terms. It is therefore doubtful whether Japan will be able to contribute as much as we had hoped to the Cairo commitment.

Another of the potentially big givers with which we are concerned is the European Union. I hope that there can be much improvement in this area. The Government are also concerned about the issue, and the Select Committee on International Development is investigating the situation. The EU performance gives me and many others cause for concern. It is the most constipated of donors: a great deal seems to go into the organisation's mouth and great intentions are spouted, but little seems to come out easily from the other end.

In 1994, the Commission announced its intention to increase funding for population programmes more than tenfold by 2000. What has happened? Is the EU contribution skewed to the poorest nations? No, in recent years there seems to have been a greater concentration of funding to Mediterranean countries. There also appears to be a shortage of expertise, which is scattered around the multiple directorates-general that have some responsibility for development.

European NGOs and others have extreme difficulty understanding the EU system. It is hard to find one's way around a system that is interminable in terms of delivery. Organisations, particularly poor organisations in developing countries, simply lose patience with a system that can take years to process a proposal. When proposals are processed, the funding is often unreliable. I welcome the Government's views on the likelihood of change.

I turn to other areas of particular concern. I shall not refer to the importance of services for young people because my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Ms McCafferty) will seek to catch your eye, Madam Speaker, to talk about her valuable work in this connection. In this country and elsewhere in the world, we cannot adopt the posture of the ostrich and simply wish that young people would stop doing it. It is futile simply to aim our services at married couples and those whom we deem to be mature. In sub-Saharan Africa, eight out of 10 young people are sexually active. Many babies are born to very young women—there are 15 million births a year to girls aged 15 to 19. I applaud NGOs such as Population Concern that are involved in this difficult work which is often greeted with hostility. Unless those young people are fully aware of AIDS and how to combat it, for example, they will simply never become adults.

The IPPF and others are doing valuable work in eastern and central Europe of a very different focus. Those countries often had services that have collapsed with the disintegration of the USSR. They are becoming poorer and poorer. Those countries had services, but they were the wrong services because they were based on abortion, so in many countries there were as many abortions as there were live births. It is not allowable under the Cairo protocol, and rightly so, to use abortion as a method of birth control.

It is my belief that, sadly, the biggest challenge to face this country and Europe in the next 10 years will be a further collapse of the area of the former USSR. We must not forget the reproductive needs of people in those countries. I commend the Europe section of the IPPF for the work that it has been doing. I support the—often new—family planning associations in those countries where there has been no tradition of volunteering and where civil society has had to be built up. Women there now have to pay for services that previously were free.

Those are volatile countries where the threat of fascism and further social upheaval is constantly present. We have to support the family planning associations and other volunteers who are emerging, often in a hostile atmosphere. What reassurance will the Minister give me that such work is of great importance to the Department for International Development and that he will ensure that we and the European Union generally support it?

Finally, I turn to the scourge of HIV and AIDS. The figures are nightmarish. More than 33 million people are affected worldwide and they are overwhelmingly in the poorest parts of the world. For example, in Botswana, 25 per cent. of the population is HIV positive. An increasing proportion are women who have been infected by their straying husbands. Already in Botswana—this figure is stark—the life expectancy of the population has fallen from 61 to 47. The number of orphans is sky-rocketing as the vast majority of those who die are aged 20 to 50. At clinics that I visited in Tanzania, staff could not dream of testing pregnant women for HIV because women would no longer attend clinics that tested them and gave them bad news about themselves and their babies.

It is difficult in humanitarian terms to think of a more pressing case in respect of which the Cairo commitments should be honoured. Will the Minister tell me whether there are any international signs of optimism in policy approaches or of countries successfully reducing rates of infection?

I am grateful to the House and the Minister for listening to those points. I hope that the whole House and the country will back the Government in their work to support the outcome of the 1994 Cairo conference. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government are approaching the deliberations on Cairo plus five years.

9.52 am

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): As one who was part of the delegation at the Cairo conference, I thought that I should make a short speech today. I was rather tied up on the Greater London Authority Bill all day yesterday and will be again today, so my preparation is not what it might have been. I congratulate the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on securing the debate, and I agreed with almost every word that he said.

I have drawn the attention of the House to population growth on many occasions during the past decade. The bare statistics are horrifying. When one considers that between the time that we adjourned the House last night and today, another 100,000 people came into the world, one begins to realise the consequences of population growth on the globe and its environment. Another statistic reveals that a third of the world's population is under the age of 15. Those people are tomorrow's parents, and population growth will continue relentlessly.

There are, of course, signs of encouragement. Those of us who have taken an interest in the subject over the years will have received Population Concern's regular data sheets. Before the debate, I picked up two at random—one from 1983 and one from 1993—as a matter of interest and to find out what projections were being made in those years. In 1983, it was forecast that by 2020, the world population would be 7.8 billion. The best comparative statistic is that in that year the world's population was projected to double within 39 years. A decade later, the projection was that the world's population would double in 42 years. That is a clear sign that the policies that have been put into effect in the past two decades are beginning to work.

Population growth has a serious impact on any nation. Whatever one may say about China's population policies—none of us feels entirely comfortable with them—they are achieving results. It is only by addressing the threat to stability in China that its Government have been able to stabilise population growth. I drew attention to the reduction in the doubling time for the world's population; much of that is attributable to the stabilisation of population growth in China.

The threat of population growth to any country is obvious. If a population is growing by 3 per cent. a year, that country must provide 3 per cent. more jobs, 3 per cent. more schools, 3 per cent. more electricity and other resources. If the economy is growing at 2 per cent., the country is going backwards. That is the stark truth.

I am proud that the previous Government recognised the problem—although they took some persuading—and the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie was right to draw attention to that. I recognise that the present Government have, by and large, continued the previous Government's policies, and I pay tribute to that. The Under-Secretary of State for International Development, who will reply to the debate, has a long tradition of involvement in the issue and is supportive, although the restraints of office may, now and again, have an impact on his thinking.

I pay tribute to the key non-governmental organisations in this country who have done so much in this field. Two are outstanding: Population Concern, whose data sheets I referred to, and Marie Stopes International. For a number of reasons, not everyone feels comfortable with the work of MSI—although I am very comfortable with it—but its contribution and role are unparalleled. I remember visiting one of its clinics in Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, and seeing the dramatic impact that it was having in the suburbs and inner-city areas of, for example, Addis Ababa. MSI tries to make its clinics self-financing by making a small charge for contraception. Having got a clinic up and running, the organisation moves on and opens another.

The 1994 Cairo conference was set in changing circumstances. It took place at the end of the Reagan era in the United States, and a more enlightened view was taken by the US Government, who were relaxing their opposition to support for global population programmes. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church was still determinedly opposed to any such programmes. It was the leader of the opposition at the Cairo conference. However, the conference was essentially a triumph.

Until Cairo there had been no global programme and no recognition across the world that population growth was a problem. As the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie said, it was within the gift of the conference to do something about that. The protocol that emerged recognised the problem and provided a solution. It recognised that there was a right of reproductive health and enshrined the phrase "reproductive health" in the world language. The mood at Cairo was that something had to be done. Of the 130 or so countries that participated, all bar two or three signed up to the final declaration.

[Mr. Richard Ottaway]

There was also a parliamentary fringe at Cairo, and I had the privilege of making a speech in the chamber of the Egyptian Parliament. The Parliament had shut down for a week—perhaps it was in recess—and representatives from the 130 countries spoke about this most important issue.

Where have we got to in the post-Cairo era? The commitment remains, but I do not know whether it is being matched financially. The hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie was right to draw attention to the nations that could improve their performance in funding programmes. I also sense that, to some extent, the heat has gone out of the issue. Cairo put the heat into it, and perhaps in five years' time the 10-year successor to Cairo will inspire an escalation of interest in it again. One or two of the donor nations could be doing more than they are at present.

There is also a certain squeamishness among some Governments and NGOs as to whether or not they should be making a full-bloodied commitment to what are effectively family planning programmes. There is no question but that family planning without education is unacceptable. The people who are to receive family planning must be educated, but some groups still feel that that is a bit too up front and that family planning should be packaged with other issues such as maternal health, women's rights and many others that I could think of if I concentrated a little harder. However, if a programme covers all these things, the family planning element is watered down. We must not lose sight of the fact that contraception is the basic need, whatever else is included in a programme, and the watering down of the family planning element must be tackled.

None the less, the Cairo conference was a success. Indeed, as I said earlier, it was a triumph. It achieved its objectives and set in train a momentum. I hope that will be the tone of the next five years as we build up to the successor conference.

10.2 am

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on securing this debate. It is an important time to discuss the issues surrounding Cairo-plus-five. I must apologise to my hon. Friend and to the House because I have to leave early. I have to chair a meeting of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs at 11 am, so I shall not be able to hear all the winding-up speeches.

The all-party group on population, development and reproductive health which, as my hon. Friend said, I chair, sponsored a reception in the House last November by Marie Stopes International to mark the 10th anniversary of the safe motherhood initiative. I shall focus on the way that the Cairo conference moved the debate on from a purely demographic way of thinking about population programmes towards the broader concept of sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, and an emphasis on the importance of women's interests, needs and rights as essential components of development.

Among the challenges facing the world is, as well as the horrendous list that my hon. Friend outlined, the fact that every minute of every day, a woman dies from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, most of which are preventable. Also, the vast majority—99 per cent.—of the 585,000 deaths that occur each year take place in the developing world. For every woman who dies, approximately 30 more suffer injuries, infections or disabilities, some of which have lifelong consequences. Some 3 million families endure the death of their newborn in the first week of life. As a result of the 100 million or so acts of sexual intercourse that take place each day, there are also an estimated 900,000 new cases of sexually transmitted diseases and 8,500 new HIV infections. Women are increasingly being affected by these infections. The statistics show clearly that sexual activity and reproduction still pose considerable threats to women's health and well-being.

The all-party group welcomes the Government's commitment, set out in the White Paper, to reduce maternal mortality by 75 per cent. by 2015. To do that, we must face the challenge of unsafe abortion. There are 20 million a year, resulting in 70,000 deaths and literally millions of disabilities. The Cairo programme of action recognised the health impact of unsafe abortion as of "major public health concern". Of course, we must recognise the difficulties in tackling the issue.

Parliamentarians from around the world attended a seminar in Brussels last year. Some Latin American Members of Parliament had a problem with incorporating the resolution on unsafe abortion in an agreed statement. They eventually acknowledged that it was a problem, and rightly so. We must call on countries like ourselves—for example, Denmark, Sweden and Finland—which have safe legal abortion services to work for similar conditions for women worldwide. If the European Union could take unsafe abortion on board as a public health issue, it would be a great step forward for global human rights.

As a priority, abortion needs to be integrated into a broad reproductive health service, offering a wide range of contraceptive choices, including emergency contraception, good technical care and easy access. Once a woman has decided on the option of abortion, she should have the possibility of early and quick referral for advice, counselling and treatment.

Action can be taken to make progress by reallocating and using efficiently public and private funds in support of various initiatives. Education and information need to be available through multiple channels, including the media, women's organisations and professional associations.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): The hon. Gentleman mentioned emergency contraception. Did he see the reports in our press last week, which stated that hospitals were refusing women emergency contraception after unprotected intercourse, and that that was affecting younger women in particular? I am sure he will agree that it is necessary to keep our eye on the domestic problem as well as the worldwide problem.

Mr. Jones: I wholly agree with the hon. Lady. The all-party group acknowledges that we do not have all the answers, but I am stressing that at least we have safe clinical abortion available in this country when absolutely necessary. I also agree that emergency contraception is paramount in preventing unnecessary abortions. I hope that we make further progress in this country because teenage pregnancy is our black spot. I was going to say

that we should institute sexual education in schools and health facilities because that is another means of preventing teenage pregnancies.

We should educate health care providers, physicians and other professionals in the specifics of abortion laws and regulations, emphasising providers' responsibilities to deliver services to the fullest extent allowed by law. We should also have advocacy services, and should build the broad political will, as well as the commitment of health care officials and providers in particular, to ensure that safe services are available to all women to the full extent of existing law. Such services must be affordable by all women.

We must remove barriers to access to good quality, gender-sensitive sexual education for people of all ages. Where abortion is allowed on a range of legal grounds, we should design and enforce policies to ensure that good quality, affordable services are available to all women. Achieving the social and policy changes necessary to enable women and men to achieve sexual and reproductive health will entail another effort of co-operation between NGOs and Governments.

Quality reproductive and sexual health services clearly respond to people's needs better than a service offering only fertility regulation, although that is better than no service at all. Societal changes are necessary for those services to become a priority, and achieving the new priorities of women's empowerment and equity in a climate of reduced funding calls for a respect for human rights and for the wisdom of Governments who are currently having to cope with these sexual and reproductive health needs.

I know that we are preaching to the converted when addressing our Secretary of State and Under-Secretary of State for International Development on such matters—at least I hope so. The all-party group and I wish them well in their negotiations with colleagues on Cairo-plus-five for the environment, the well-being of men and women and the future of the human race.

10.10 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I congratulate the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on giving us the opportunity to debate this very important issue. This is one of the splendid occasions on which there is much all-party consensus. In their excellent speeches, the hon. Members for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) and for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) described different aspects of the problem. The difficulty is that, if we are not careful, we overwhelm ourselves with statistics, quoting one after the other to persuade ourselves that the problem is intractable. I do not believe that that is so. I share the view of the hon. Member for Croydon, South that there are distinct signs of hope in what has happened since Cairo.

I am particularly privileged to be able to speak on this issue. Normally, I would not be allowed to do so because the Liberal Democrats have a much better qualified colleague in my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), who would have been delighted to participate in today's debate had she not been in southern Sudan and, therefore, not easily available. I know that she would have made a valuable contribution.

Let us reiterate the fact that, as the world population approaches the 6 billion landmark, it is growing by 78 million people a year. The hon. Member for Croydon, South drew a telling analogy in saying how many people had been added to our population since last night. To put it another way, 78 million people is the population of France, Greece and Sweden combined. That is the scale of the issue.

Population concerns are at the heart of sustainable development strategies because rapid growth and high fertility hold back development and help perpetuate poverty. They make it hard for countries to concentrate on the future as they would want, because they are running to keep pace with current needs. One of the great achievements of the Cairo conference was to move away from a view based on coercion, setting targets and a top-down approach. Instead, emphasis was placed on individual decisions and prospects, and the various factors that affect such personal decisions. The conference moved towards integration of services, education and quality of care, and emphasised meeting individual needs. Once such needs are met, there is a chance that better educated personal decisions will be made.

In making such moves, the conference rightly laid stress on some social factors that might not otherwise have been prominent, such as equality, equity and the empowerment of women, which are very important in this context. Saying to women in some developing countries, where such concepts are not the historical norm, that there are alternatives to child bearing extends their educative process—if education is at all available—therefore delaying the start of child bearing, and enhancing education and the career and life style opportunities that that provides. The conference stressed the involvement of men, and how they should understand that women have rights. It considered the operation of such a big change in cultural norms, and placed emphasis on social practices, some of which are quite inimical to the progress that one hopes will be made. That is why we are right to emphasise that discrimination against girls in their education and against women in their social rights is critical.

No one can deny that there is a link between population, poverty and development. However, the link between economic factors and population growth is not simple or a straight quid pro quo. There is not necessarily a reduction in population growth as a result of economic growth. Indeed, economic drivers are very often the reason for large families, simply because such families are a necessity if one is to protect oneself in later years and provide for the family unit.

Let us remember that, of the 4.4 billion people in developing nations, a fifth have no access to health services, such as those that we would describe as health services, a quarter no adequate housing, a third no access to clean water and 60 per cent. no access to safe sewers. Such statistics are important because they extend the argument beyond population issues to other areas of international development. There is a seamless robe between the two; one cannot separate them.

Another key point is that the environment and population growth are inextricably linked. If one cares about the environment, one must care about poor countries, where substantial population growth contributes to its despoliation. Such despoliation, however, occurs at both ends of the economic spectrum. A very small part of the population—those in the richest countries—consumes the majority of the world's resources. The richest fifth of the world consumes 86 per cent. of all goods and services and causes 83 per cent. of all carbon dioxide emissions.

[Mr. David Heath]

At the same time, market systems subsidise environmentally damaging practices. It is a paradox that the greatest environmental threat is caused by both the wealthiest billion and the poorest billion people in the world, who are struggling to stay alive, feed families and ensure that their families have some life.

I would not do justice to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park if I did not spend a moment addressing the issues of AIDS and HIV. She is one of the foremost advocates in the House and elsewhere of the need to address such important matters. Of the 33.4 million people who are infected with AIDS, 1.3 million are children. In 1998, 70 per cent. of the 5.8 million infections were in sub-Saharan Africa. That is the great motor for all manner of difficulties. The people who are affected are the economically active part of the population. As a result of the epidemic—a pandemic in parts of the world—there is a motor for poverty, instability and all manner of future problems, which will be extremely difficult to solve if we do not address them properly.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way on the subject of HIV and AIDS. Does he agree that Governments of the sub-Saharan nations, including Zimbabwe, are not entirely blameless for the spread of HIV and AIDS, given that Zimbabwe's Health Minister stood in their Parliament more than 10 years ago denying that there was such a thing—apart, perhaps, from that which could be caught by eating food that had not been grown in Zimbabwe? If we face such comments, which are not just ignorance but propaganda, how on earth can pandemics be stopped in their tracks? We must surely ensure that Governments are on board, spreading a good message rather than a predominantly evil one.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I agree that Governments have a special role to play. Governments elsewhere in the world have shut their eyes very tightly to the problem, too, hoping that it would go away—or, worse, spreading untruths about the nature of the epidemic and the way in which it can be countered. That is an enormous tragedy. However, we have probably made substantially progress. Governments now recognise that they have a massive problem on their hands. They recognise—but sometimes cannot meet—the needs that exist. That is where the countries of the rich world have a serious part to play.

I conclude with a simple thought. In this subject area, the outstanding fact is that partnership works—partnership between Governments, or between Governments, non-governmental organisations, Churches and so on. Preventive education works. Economic stability combined with adequate health services works. There has been a positive development since the Cairo summit: people no longer believe that population control is something that the north tells the south to do, and occasionally sends missionaries out to help it to do. Instead, a dialogue has started between the southern nations, which has worked much more effectively. Occasionally, the south now tells the north how to do it right, which is equally healthy in the modern world.

I hope that the Minister can reinforce those positive signs. I hope that he will tell us that the Government will continue to work to make some of the aspirations of the Cairo summit a reality, and to continue the progress that has been made in the past five years.

10.21 am

Ms Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on securing this debate on a subject that is so close to my heart, and so important.

The first Cairo conference was a watershed for global population and development issues. Countries now accept that—as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) eloquently said—rapid population growth, high fertility and gender inequality hold back development and help perpetuate poverty. The conference recognised that the keys to smaller families and slower population growth are empowerment and free choice, not demographic targets. Most women, given the choice, will have fewer children than their mothers did. Choice means more access to reproductive health care, including family planning.

Today's world has the largest ever population of young people—about 1.1 billion, of whom 913 million live in the less-developed world. The problems that those young people face in sexual and reproductive health are huge. Every year, 15 million 15 to 19-year-olds give birth, and 13 million of those are in Asia, Africa and Latin America. We have heard that some 10 per cent. of the 45 million abortions taking place each year are to 15 to 19-year-olds, and nearly half those are unsafe. Every year, one in 20 teenagers will contract a sexually transmitted disease. Deep-rooted discrimination against the girl child at every level in some societies compounds the problems that surround reproductive and sexual health.

It was against that background that the all-party parliamentary group on population, development and reproductive health decided to look in more detail at the challenges that face young people in managing their sexual and reproductive lives, and to identify the actions that we, as parliamentarians, can take to help them to face those challenges successfully.

Our approach was to hold two hearings in May 1998, which I was privileged to chair, and our report, "Taking Young People Seriously", was launched in December. That documents the facts—sometimes brutal—of young people's lives in developed and developing countries.

The experience of our two hearings was memorable, and sometimes profoundly shocking. The evidence was presented by 12 NGOs working with young people in the developed and the developing world. As a result, we made six recommendations; I should like to say briefly why we made each one. However, I could ask all hon. Members to read the report for the rich variety of information and experience that it documents.

Our first recommendation was that Governments and other agencies should acknowledge that young people have sex and take a realistic and proactive approach to policy and public education, nationally and internationally, about young people and sexual and reproductive health.

I have outlined some statistics that our witnesses gave us, from which it is clear that young people are sexually active. The risks of death are two to four times greater for

mothers under 20 than for mothers aged 20 or more. Ten per cent. of the 45 million abortions that take place every year are to girls aged between 15 and 19 years—and half those abortions are unsafe. When HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are put into that equation, the size of the challenge becomes obvious.

Our witnesses pointed out that adolescent sexual and reproductive health was seen as an unpopular issue. Dealing with adolescent sexuality presented a challenge for all NGOs working in the field. They felt that there was a need to move away from the negative approach of "limiting the damage" caused by teenage pregnancy to addressing teenagers' needs more positively.

Even in the United Kingdom there are many challenges. About 10 per cent. of girls start their periods unaware of periods, because no one has talked to them about the subject. A third to a half of young people under 16 are already having penetrative sex. The UK has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in western Europe—9.4 per 1,000—and an increasing rate of sexually transmitted diseases.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: The hon. Lady is painting a dismal—and recognisable—picture. We have free contraception, and abortions are available in the place of contraception in this country, yet rates of under-age sex, abortion and pregnancy are rising. Can she explain that? Secondly, does she believe that parents have a right and a responsibility for their under-age children, and that they should be aware when abortions are carried out on their children or contraception provided to those children?

Ms McCafferty: I believe that, if the hon. Lady is patient, she will find that the replies to her questions are in the responses that were made to the parliamentary hearings, and the group's recommendations. It is more a question of how things are done than of what is being done. I believe that, if the hon. Lady is patient, she will be able to take a different view.

Some developing countries are reluctant to recognise sexual activity in young people, and believe that to give young people information and services would be to impose a western model, which they see as promiscuous. As has been said, they associate the idea of sex education with the idea of increasing sexual activity for young people, and deny the existence of sexual activity among their own young people.

Our second recommendation was that Governments and other donors should give high priority to encouraging new approaches to sexual and reproductive health programmes, especially those that involve young people in their design and implementation, and provide on-going sustainable funding for such initiatives.

It emerged clearly from what our witnesses said that, for services and projects to be successful, it was necessary to listen to what young people wanted, respond to those needs and involve young people in the implementation of projects—and that projects that did not do so were bound to fail. Interestingly, young people the whole world over want the same things. Research shows clearly that young people want confidential sex advice centres free of charge and without appointments. They do not like words such as "family planning" or "drop in". Young people in Ireland, Zambia and South Africa want exactly the same things. They want to be involved in the design and implementation of projects that involve their sexual and reproductive health.

We heard of a variety of outreach projects in the United Kingdom, including youth panels. Particularly impressive is a programme in Zambia where young peer counsellors of a very young age are proud to wear tee-shirts proclaiming, "I am a peer counsellor". That is a good example of where the south can teach the north something about sexual and reproductive health and how to get through to young people and ensure a positive response. However, all these things are only drops in the ocean. They need replicating on a huge scale.

Another crucial fact to emerge from our hearings was the need for sustainable funding. It was clear to me and to the other members of the panel that for the foreseeable future sustainable funding will have to be from government and other official sources.

We had explicit evidence of how difficult it is to obtain financial support from private donors. Some manufacturers of products rely heavily on sexuality in youth for selling their products. Hon. Members will have heard the slogan "Everybody snogs in Joe Bloggs". However, Joe Bloggs is not interested in supporting young people's sexual health projects. This attitude seems to be shared by both Levi Strauss and Coca-Cola, both of which use sex as a method of selling their products. They appear to be unwilling to take responsibility for making that same sex safer for young people.

The perennial headache for NGOs is how to cope with success. New services rapidly attract clients, but the funding stays the same. Success for Belfast Brook meant that, in 12 months, it saw 5,000 young people. However, it was funded for only 3,500. If we are to take the need for young people's services seriously, that situation is clearly unacceptable. Governments and other official donors must take long-term responsibility for supporting services in the developed and developing world. That is the key message for the Department for International Development, the Department of Health and the European Commission.

Our third recommendation was that Governments and agencies should recognise the need for safe legal abortion as an integral part of sexual and reproductive health services for young people, and provide full, on-going funding for such services. The United Kingdom Government should, in particular, take measures to deal with the anomaly of the right to legal abortion services for the women of Northern Ireland.

The statistics have already been quoted and they speak for themselves. The need to pay attention to adolescent childbirth and unsafe abortion is a matter of life and death for young people in less-developed countries. In Zambia, a quarter of maternal deaths due to self-inflicted abortion are of girls under 19. The vulnerability of young women is forcefully illustrated by the rape statistics in South Africa, where one rape occurs every 50 seconds. In Northern Ireland, which is, of course, part of the UK, there is little sex education. There is a high rate of sexual abuse and both teenage pregnancies and abortion exist. Abortion is a sensitive issue, but it is essential to address it if progress is to be made in providing sexual and reproductive health services for young people.

Our fourth recommendation was that Governments and agencies should ensure that health professionals who work with young people are committed to and fully trained in confidentiality, that they understand its importance and understand also what it means in practice. It is clear that young people do not trust health professionals when they

[Ms McCafferty]

consult them about sexual and reproductive health matters. It is of paramount importance for success that a service is confidential. It is a real issue for young people. They do not trust grown-ups, and that applies across the board; they do not trust them at all.

A young person's right to confidentiality and to receive health information and services is recognised under the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, which has been ratified by all but two member countries. The convention lays a responsibility on health professionals to provide adolescents with information and services, even if that goes against the parents' wishes, provided that the child has developed the necessary capacity and maturity to understand the nature and consequences of the information and services to be provided. The Cairo and Beijing women's conferences criticised the failure of health professionals to observe and respect informed consent and confidentiality in respect of adolescent girls. It was clear that all the NGOs working with young people were aware of the importance of confidentiality. That needs to be translated into practice by ensuring that health professionals are equally committed.

Our fifth recommendation was that Governments and agencies should encourage and provide sustainable funding for the provision of support and information for parents to help to facilitate their communication with their children on sex and sexual relationships. Parents emerged as a neglected species. There was general recognition that they needed help to fulfil their roles and to know how to support their children's needs. There is evidence to show that young people want their parents to talk to them and be willing to talk about sex. However, it seemed that many parents found that difficult.

Our final recommendation was that Governments and agencies should take measures to make emergency contraception as widely available as possible for young people. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) is a long-standing family planning doctor. She has called for emergency contraception to be made freely available to young people. Research demonstrates clearly how difficult it is for young people to obtain emergency contraception. Many do not even know who to approach or, as the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) so starkly said, they are refused help when they seek it.

At 1.1 billion, this is history's largest generation of young people between the ages of 15 and 24, and their numbers are rapidly increasing in many countries. The reproductive behaviour of all these young people will determine our planet's future. It is critical that all societies address their education, employment and, especially, health needs. I hope that the Government will take a lead.

10.39 am

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): This is the first time that I have taken part in a debate in the House on population and development. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) who, unlike me, has been an instigator of and regular contributor to debates on population growth. I pay tribute to his expertise, which was very much in evidence today. I pay tribute also to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), who is a regular contributor to this important subject and someone whom I would consider to be an expert on it. I think that it is obvious to us all that population growth is a serious issue and a real danger, given the finite resources of our world.

In one sense, the statistics say it all. However, the evidence of our eyes as we travel confirms and underlines the statistics. As I have travelled to various parts of the world over the past six years, three things have struck me that relate to the subject that we are discussing. When I went to India for the first time, I was struck more than anything else, apart from the poverty, by the sheer volume of people in every city, town and village. It seemed that they were living their lives by the side of the road. Nine hundred million people is an awful lot of people.

I went to Nigeria shortly before Christmas. Again, I was struck by the sheer volume of people. There are 120 million in that relatively small country. A fifth of all black Africans are Nigerians; the sheer numbers are overwhelming.

The second striking feature that I have observed in my recent escapades is the staggeringly high percentage of young people in those countries. The percentage of the population below the age of 20 in Kenya is a bewildering 58 per cent. In Nigeria, 55 per cent. of the population is below the age of 20. The corresponding figure in Zimbabwe is 57 per cent. and in Uganda, 50 per cent. of the population is aged 14 and under. Those are young, fertile people who will make their own contribution to the subject under discussion.

The third fact that I have observed as I have travelled is that middle-class families tend to have three or four children, whereas poor families have eight, nine or perhaps more children. The reasons are obvious and frequently rehearsed. It is worth saying that the situation used to be the same in Britain and throughout the now industrialised world.

The inevitable conclusion is that population growth is clearly related to poverty, lack of education and lack of access to good-quality family planning and reproductive health services. The 1994 international conference on population and development in Cairo was an important event. For the first time ever, a consensus emerged among most nations on a raft of measures to be implemented over a 20-year period. A programme of action was settled.

Five years on, few of us would dispute that the right objectives were set: sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development; education, especially for girls; and universal access to reproductive health services, including family planning and sexual health. There is no need for wholesale review or reform of those objectives, which have stood the test of time. The difficulty, as ever, is in the implementation. There is no magic bullet.

It is clear that restricting population growth in the developing world is part of the wider issues of poverty and lack of opportunity which afflict too many people around the world, although in that context, the issue requires a special focus. Population constraint should not be seen as separate from the wider development agenda; it is part of the same development challenge. As more and more communities achieve sustainable development, access to education, better health care, rising living standards and a greater sense of security and stability, as surely as night follows day, the number of children per household will fall.

There are examples of success. In the Indian state of Kerala, remarkable progress has been made in reducing the birth rate to half the Indian average and less than that of China. Although I accept that that is not directly related to economic success, it follows an enlightened commitment to investment in health, education and more equitable social relations. Infant mortality rates are a quarter of the average for India and half that of China. In India as a whole, one in two girl children drops out of primary school. In Kerala, completion of education is almost universal. Investment in education and health care in Kerala has played a central role in reducing fertility rates to levels comparable to those of industrialised countries.

In South Korea, the combination of rapid economic growth, universal access to primary health care, education and employment opportunities have caused the population growth rate to tumble. Those are examples of best practice and progress, from which we can take encouragement. The situation is not hopeless—it is simply immensely difficult.

The issue of population growth is not a separate agenda. It should motivate us to redouble our efforts to reduce poverty, build capacity, boost health care and education, and increase economic activity and opportunity throughout the world.

I have just returned from a visit to east Africa. I have seen slums in other parts of the world, but the slums that I saw in Nairobi last week were among the worst that I have ever seen. It is offensive, unnecessary and unacceptable in the modern world that people living in such circumstances do not have choices. We must all redouble our efforts to help.

I support the efforts of the British Governments, both before and after the election on 1 May 1997. We have a good track record, and I am sure that under the current Secretary of State, that progress will continue. I take this opportunity to say something that I have said in many meetings outside the House. I think that we were wrong under the previous Government to cut the aid budget. We are a rich nation, even in recession. I understand the pressures on the Treasury, but it is important that a nation such as ours should be compassionate and generous, provided that we make sure that our aid programme is effective.

Too many millions of pounds have been wasted in the past. We must continue to give a lead through our compassion and our generosity. We are a rich nation and we can make a difference. Many mistakes have been made by Governments, development agencies, aid agencies, NGOs and all of us over the past 30 years in aid and development policy. Perhaps a new consensus is emerging. There is increasing recognition of the importance of good governance, market-based economies, capacity building, empowering women, and access to education and health care, so that we can build on the lessons of the past and do more to bring about sustainable development in the developing world.

There are grounds for cautious optimism. It is important that we do not abandon hope; if we do, nothing will change. In one of the slums in Nairobi, I spoke to a young lady called Benedict, who was a grandmother at 30. We had a long conversation, at the end of which she told me that at the age of 30, she had given up hope that her life could change, or that things would ever be any different for her. She had nothing. I urged her not to give up hope, but of course I felt as I spoke that my words were empty. Even if she gives up hope, we must not give up hope on her behalf. It will not be easy, but we can make a difference. Many projects, NGOs and people all over the world are making a difference. I therefore welcome this important debate.

I shall finish with a word about coercion. There is a consensus in the House, but we must spell it out. Coercion in family planning matters is always wrong. Our approach to family planning for the developing world must be guided by the values that we embrace for ourselves. Enforced sterilisation is wrong in the UK and in the developing world. Using abortion as a form of family planning is wrong in the UK and in the developing world. If we do not approach the subject from a framework of values, we will come horribly unstuck.

In the light of those clear guiding principles, I remain uncomfortable with the fact that our Government since the election, as before, continue to contribute towards the Chinese family planning programmes. We have heard horror stories for many years. I admit that I have never seen firm evidence, yet the stories and doubts continue. I know that Ministers will say, "Give us the evidence and we will look into it." Will the Minister call on the United Nations to commission an extensive independent inquiry into the matter, so that we can get to the truth? If all is well, let us reassure ourselves and continue the programme. If all is not well, let us use whatever leverage we have to bring to an end the horrendous practices that we hear about. I ask the Minister to respond to that point.

Once again, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie for raising this important subject. I pay tribute to the Government's work. They will have the support of those on the Conservative Benches as they continue that important undertaking.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Like all hon. Members who have spoken, I join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on securing time for a debate on such an important issue and, as he said, at such an appropriate time. I thank all those who contributed to the debate, which has been well informed and almost entirely united. That is a testimony to the work done by the all-party group.

As my hon. Friend and others remarked, Cairo was a landmark agreement for international development. We cannot overestimate its impact on the way in which Governments, international organisations, donors and civil society think about and deal with population issues. The debate has made that clear.

The Cairo conference asked fundamental questions about people and poverty—as hon. Members said, we have to address issues beyond only population and reproductive health—and about the future prospect for the sustainable development of our planet. It also agreed a set of bold solutions, with a focus on individuals' right to the highest possible standards of reproductive health. The goals agreed at Cairo form the basis of many of the international development targets that inspire the British Government's strategy for improving all aspects of poor people's lives.

[Mr. George Foulkes]

In less than six months, a United Nations General Assembly special session will decide what progress the world has made in implementing the Cairo goals. As I said, today's debate has given hon. Members an opportunity to provide early input into that process. The Government greatly encourage such early debates on international discussions. As the review commences, I am pleased to share some of the Government's perspectives on progress made, lessons learned and obstacles encountered in taking forward the Cairo agenda, and on how we must do better in future.

I am grateful to hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter) for his wholehearted support of the Government's action. In the House's previous debate on the issue, I was the Opposition spokesman and said almost exactly the same as he said today. That is an encouraging development—although it is even more encouraging that I am now on the Government Benches. However, that is another matter.

As hon. Members said, our planet's population has almost doubled since the 1960s. As the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) rightly said, evidence suggests that the world grows more unequal as it grows more populous. The gap in per capita income between the richest and poorest fifth of the world has also doubled since 1960.

Although population growth rates have peaked, the world continues to grow by more than 80 million people a year. If our newspaper headlines are right in saying that the "population explosion" is over, they should also deal with the fact that the children of the population explosion—1 billion young people, the largest generation in human history—are now entering their reproductive years. As my hon. Friends said, the choices made by those young people will determine the prospects for a fair, healthy and stable world which is fit for future generations. We have to ensure that those young people are given a choice, and that they are not denied the means to make their choice.

As the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) said, 10 years ago, we expected that, in the next century, the world population would reach about 14 billion before levelling off. Today, thankfully, the UN expects 10 billion to be the upper population limit. How did that remarkable change occur? The answer, as he said, has been in modern family planning. It is encouraging that 57 per cent. of the world's couples are now using modern family planning methods, compared with 9 per cent. 30 years ago. There has been a great improvement.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: I had rather understood my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) to say that part of the success demonstrated by the figures that the Minister is quoting was attributable to events in China. My hon. Friend was not proud of those events—the one-child policy, forced sterilisation, forced abortion until birth and the killing of girl babies. What part have those events played in the figures that the Minister is quoting?

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Lady is on one of her hobby-horses. As it has been raised, I should perhaps deal now with the important issue of China.

We are concerned about reports of reproductive abuses in China. We regularly raise the issue of human rights in our dialogue with Peking, both bilaterally and with our European Union partners. We all want there to be changes in policy and practice in China, and we fully support constructive engagement by responsible international organisations.

When I was in China, some years ago, I saw in practice the type of independent evaluation requested by the hon. Member for South–West Devon. I also read the results of that evaluation, which does not reach the same conclusions as the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton). I am sure that the hon. Member for Croydon, South will be the first to agree that change is required not only in China, but in many other places, too.

I should like very briefly to deal with a few other points made in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie has asked whether the United Kingdom is contributing its fair share towards fulfilling the Cairo commitments. United Kingdom assistance for population and reproductive health accounts for 3.5 per cent. of our total aid spend. Moreover, that figure does not include the money that we are giving to the World bank and to the European Commission. We are, therefore, making a very substantial commitment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie and other hon. Members also asked about what the European Community is doing to address the issue. We have encouraged the EC to do more, and have now seconded a United Kingdom national expert to the Commission to work on the matter. Although we have seen changes, we shall press for more action by the EC.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie also asked what we are doing to deal with the human immune deficiency virus and the acquired immune deficiency syndrome. We are making a huge, and increasing, contribution to dealing with that problem. Three weeks ago, in South Africa, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced our commitment to programme £100 million on HIV-AIDS work over the next three years. The bulk of that will be targeted on sub-Saharan Africa. It is a huge, and increasing, contribution.

I do not have time to deal with all the issues that have been raised in the debate, although I shall write to hon. Members if I have been unable to reply to specific points. However, I should deal with the abortion issue, which has been raised by several hon. Members.

The Cairo consensus on abortion is clear and—as far as the Government are concerned—non-negotiable: abortion must not be promoted as a method of family planning, and we must work to avoid the need for it. Family planning plays an essential role in achieving that goal. However, we must recognise the reality of abortion. There are many reasons why a woman may seek to terminate a pregnancy. If freely chosen, a woman should be able to do so without risk of life-threatening consequences to her health. I hope that all hon. Members will realise that unsafe abortion is a serious public health risk in developing countries.

I should now like to try to deal with the main question asked by hon. Members—what will the Government do to follow up the Cairo conference? As my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie said, next month, in The Hague, there will be an intergovernmental forum,

as a precursor to the General Assembly meeting in New York. Moreover, the Secretary of State herself will lead the United Kingdom delegation at the United Nations General Assembly special session, to underline our commitment to the international conference on population and development-plus-five process.

Cairo brought together 180 countries in unprecedented agreement about the type of action needed to make a real difference to reproductive heath and the rights of all people. Hon. Members who were there, or who read about it in the media, will remember how narrowly that consensus was achieved. Therefore, Cairo-plus-five must, first, move the debate forward, not reopen it.

Secondly, the ICPD must reinvigorate international political will. Thirdly, the review must consolidate progress. It must identify the strategies that worked best in advancing the Cairo goals, understand them better and ensure that they are disseminated and put into practice more widely.

Fourthly, we must focus attention on priorities in which intensified support is needed. We believe that more concerted and coherent global action is needed—on HIV-AIDS, on maternal health, on meeting the needs of young people and on contraceptive supplies.

In development, we talk about food security. As HIV prevalence is as high as one in four people in parts of urban Africa, reproductive health commodities, such as male and female condoms, are also basic needs. The international community, therefore, must work harder to ensure contraceptive security. To do that, we have to achieve agreement on a set of effective milestones in better monitoring ICPD implementation.

The Cairo strategy, and all the international development goals, stand or fall on Governments' ability to judge the progress that they are making. We have to support developing countries' capacity in statistical analysis and data gathering. In 1994, the ICPD did not foresee the need for a new benchmark on the global progression of HIV. As I said, we believe that such a benchmark is now urgently needed to spur more intensive efforts in preventing the spread of HIV.

Fifthly, we must position reproductive health as a central priority for international action, and further clarify the role of relevant multilateral actors, particularly the international UN architecture.

Finally, we must distil key "take home" messages to direct coherent and concerted international action in the coming years. They should—like Cairo itself—resonate and stick in the mind of policy makers. As the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome rightly said, we shall achieve our objectives through partnership.

The Government look forward to working on the issue with the House in the coming six months and beyond. Subsequent debates in the House on the issue will inform the action and encourage the work undertaken by the Government on behalf of the House.

Points of Order

11 am

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wish to make a brief, but nevertheless important, point of order concerning the rights of this House, the rights of Members and the danger that precedent may be broken today. I understand that there is to be a statement today on House of Lords reform. Having checked precedent, I discovered that—going back to the time of Asquith and, more recently, in Harold Wilson's time as Prime Minister—major statements on House of Lords reforms and the Second Reading of Bills were given by the Prime Minister.

It is unusual for me to quote Harold Wilson, but in 1969, he said:

"It is in accordance with precedent, Mr. Speaker, that any major legislative proposals involving major constitutional change, reform of our Parliamentary system, the constitution and powers of another place, should be presented to the House by the Prime Minister of the day."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 1969; Vol. 777, c. 45.]

What can you and your colleagues do, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to ensure that all Members of the House have the same rights as our predecessors had in 1969, in other reform measures this century, in Asquith's time and in measures presented by Gladstone in the last century? If all those Prime Ministers thought it appropriate and right to report to this House on their proposals for major constitutional change—and were following precedent by so doing—surely the current Prime Minister should not treat this House with contempt, but should come here in person.

If reform of the House of Lords is, in the view of the Prime Minister, an important people's priority, surely he should tell this House and, through this House, the people of this country what he proposes, not leave it to one of his Ministers.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When the House went into recess before Christmas, British troops were in combat in Iraq. It is also the precedent, on a matter of such gravity, that the Prime Minister of the day reports to the House from the Dispatch Box. I have waited patiently for the Prime Minister to come to the Dispatch Box to report to the House. Following that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. That is not a point of order for the Chair. It is not a matter on which I can rule; it is entirely a matter for the Government.

In respect of the point of order raised by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), I have no knowledge of whether a statement is to be made today, but the question of who makes such statements is entirely a matter for the Government. His point of order, which is taking up private Members' time, should be made if and when that statement is made to the House.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it an entirely different point of order?

Mr. Jack: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it an entirely different point of order?

Mr. Jack: Of course. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Is it an entirely different point of order?

Mr. Jack: It is entirely different.

I awoke this morning to radio reports that there was a significant development in terms of constitutional legislation. Details of it seemed to be available, in plentiful quantity, to the BBC. Can you assist Members of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by making clear whether it is a discourtesy to the House that that type of information has been made available, before being made available to Parliament? If the Prime Minister has had anything to do with releasing that information, perhaps you would care to deprecate that action from the Chair.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Madam Speaker has always made it clear to the House that important decisions, if they are to be made, should be announced to the House first of all. Perhaps we can move on to private Members' business.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that we have dealt adequately with that matter. This morning is private Members' time. There will be adequate time to discuss all these issues at the appropriate time. It is important that we move on to—

Mr. Bruce: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it an entirely separate point of order?

Mr. Bruce: Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right, I shall take it.

Mr. Bruce: I know that the Chair is keen to ensure that the rights of Back Benchers are looked after. Before Christmas, I asked the Prime Minister a question at Question Time. His response was that I had my facts wrong on long-term unemployment among young people, effectively saying that I was misleading the House with the figures that I quoted.

I wrote to the Prime Minister last year, giving him the full facts and asking—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is clearly not the time to raise matters of that sort.

Horticulture

11.5 am

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I should say at the outset that, although the debate may have lost a few moments because of the points of order, they were about matters that are of great concern to all Members of this House, and I do not resent the exchanges that have taken place. I shall go on immediately to the problems of the horticulture industry.

I am delighted and honoured to have the privilege of initiating a brief debate on the important topic of horticulture. It is nice to have the support of a number of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members, although I am conscious that some hon. Members with important constituency interests in horticulture are not able to attend the debate—in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture, who has duties in respect of that Committee. However, there is a good attendance, because this is an important subject.

I shall give a little context. Many of my family traditionally have been growers in the Vale of Evesham and, although I have never lived there, I retain close links with the area and with those of my family who still practise horticulture there. It is perhaps a sign of the change in the industry that a number of them have either restructured their businesses or have gone out of the industry.

I used to be a plum grower on my farm in my constituency, and that provided valuable experience in terms of the technology of growing and the requirements of marketing, either directly at the farm gate or through wholesale markets. Therefore one has seen the tremendous changes that have taken place, and continue to take place, in the industry. I shall return to that point.

My second experience of horticulture is not unrelated, because I asked for the horticulture portfolio when I was posted to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the years 1995 to 1997, as Parliamentary Secretary. I can assure the House that I do not intend to rehearse the difficulties, or the triumphs, of that time, but I should record my personal appreciation for the high quality of the advice given by MAFF officials to Ministers—I am sure that that continues—and for the lively involvement of distinguished members of the industry in the fortunes of that industry. That is a helpful and constructive partnership.

It is necessary at the outset to establish two major and distinctive features of the British horticulture industry, in comparison with its perhaps better known farm equivalent. Not all farmers know nothing about horticulture and, especially on the field vegetable side, there may be a close relationship.

The horticulture industry, as broadly defined, has an output valued at slightly under £2 billion a year. Such definition is difficult, partly because of the greater retail involvement of horticulture in comparison with the majority of agriculture, which represents foods that go on for further processing before sale.

The industry is worth slightly under £2 billion and, although it is an imprecise measure, I used to calculate that it was worth about 10 per cent. of British agricultural

output. Despite being comparatively small proportionately, horticulture represents almost as much diversity as the rest of the agriculture industry. For example, many producers of salad onions or salad crops have been doing relatively well—although some will probably write to me to say that they have not—because of their specialist production. Ethnic foods such as ochre are produced for an ethnic minority market and, increasingly, for a British market as well, because people have diversified their tastes. Others produce bedding plants, nursery stock and traditional top or soft fruit, so the industry is extremely varied.

One of horticulture's distinctive features is that it is an intensive labour employer, whereas most of agriculture is not. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) was telling me only today that there are an estimated 30,000 full-time equivalents in Kent alone. I have always worked on a figure of more than 50,000 full-time workers engaged in horticulture, which is almost as many as there are salaried farm workers in the rest of agriculture.

A second feature is that, traditionally, horticulture has relied little on Government support. Like pig and poultry farming, but unlike most of the traditional agricultural regimes, it has been a light or unsupported regime. Long may that continue, because no one in horticulture would want to send the signal that stepping up the subsidy would benefit the industry. That could have the effect that we have seen elsewhere in the common agricultural policy, where successive Governments have tried to remove some of the subsidy and reduce the unnecessary costs in the system, so that the outcome is more market related.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way at that important point in his remarks. Although I accept his point about subsidy, does he agree that it is important that the Government of the day encourage and support the industry? Does he find it worrying, as I do, to read continuing reports in the *Grower* magazine about the number of occasions when the Minister directly responsible for horticulture, the noble Lord Donoughue, has had to cancel those encouraging engagements?

Mr. Boswell: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He was a most distinguished horticulture Minister before my time and he gave great encouragement to the industry. He is entitled to comment. I realise some of the difficulties of this debate. The noble Lord with day-to-day responsibility for horticulture is in another place and, in fairness, some cancellations have taken place because of factors outside his control. May I revert to the point about perceived support for the industry by Ministers as I bring my remarks to a close? My right hon. Friend makes a substantial point when he says that what we do not want from Government is lots of money, but what we do want is lots of encouragement and perceived attempts to solve the industry's problems.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Boswell: I shall give way just once more because I am conscious of the time restraints.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will my hon. Friend cover in his speech the issue of changes in Government employment legislation? Increasing employment costs, particularly for some horticultural activities that require large gangs of lowly paid people who would otherwise have no employment whatever, could put the horticulture industry at a serious competitive disadvantage.

Mr. Boswell: My hon. Friend reads the runes of what I have already said about the importance of horticulture as an employer, as a clear precursor to my remarks later in my speech. His analysis is entirely right. At this point, I simply say that the most important and in many ways the most refreshing element of horticulture is that it has traditionally been an unsupported or lightly supported sector. That has left it close to the market. People have been entrepreneurial and have reacted in a variety of ways. The issue now before the House is whether that native spirit, which Keynes called an animal spirit—that determination to seek a market and exploit it to make a profit—is enough to take people through the current difficulties.

Many sectors of the industry now face severe market conditions and low profitability. It will be no service to the industry to cry wolf or to say that this is the end of the industry. It is easy for tabloid newspapers to write, as they have on one or two occasions, "This is the end of the English apple industry—there will be no more Coxes". Neither the Minister nor most hon. Members who know about horticulture believe that that is so. However, to prevent it from happening, we must recognise that there are some problems.

Let me return to what I said about diversity. It is important that we analyse coolly the problems in the various sectors. Some specialist growers may be relatively prosperous at present. Large integrated businesses that may be listening to this debate may have found ways of controlling their costs and have a strong tie-up with the marketing chain. They may be using high technology and running extremely successful and professional businesses. However, people in between may be caught between a number of stalls and have to find the right niche. Although there are no large growers in my constituency, there are many relatively small businesses that supply bedding plants or nursery stock, and they are an extremely important part of diversification and providing competition in the market.

Although we must not oversell the problems, I should like to draw a number of them to the House's attention. Some come from within the industry—what one might call the MAFF sector—and others, importantly, come from elsewhere. I shall begin by dealing with the MAFF-related problems. First, there is the question of marketing support. As has already been mentioned, the regime is not generally heavy. The last thing that we would want is a return, for example in the European structure, to the old tradition of a heavy reliance on intervention, often in a wasteful and useless way.

I was pleased that, during my time at MAFF, we achieved agreement on restructuring the European marketing regime support and a new emphasis was placed on producer organisations and market development. It would be helpful if the Minister of State could, in responding, bring the House up to date on that matter. Obviously, there was a surge which happened, coincidentally, at about the time of the change of Government as people made their initial bids—MAFF was particularly helpful in securing some flexible regimes

[Mr. Boswell]

for them to do so. However, I am not clear whether the trail has gone dead yet or how much that is continuing to be developed as market conditions change.

The second area where market support is important is in relation to objective 5b. The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) is in the Chamber and may seek to participate in the debate. We all know that objective 5b may, in turn, be subject to change under the European negotiations on the matter, but it is important that areas of economic strain should be able to raise the value added of their produce and find suitable and distinctive market niches. Objective 5b, or something like it, is an important vehicle for doing that.

One area in which I took great interest was the south-west Horticulture 2000 initiative. I hope to have the privilege of launching Cornish King, which was a successful result of that initiative, and I hope that it will lead to other things. That area of market development, which does not always involve large sums, but levers in partnership approaches and other resources, is the sensible way to proceed in terms of public support for marketing.

The third area is that of research, which is also complex. Horticultural Research International and its institutes and new privatised technology arm are of high quality. They are world-class operations. I know many of the operators and I have a tremendous regard for what they have done. There is always a debate in Government about how much can be given to research, and it is terribly important that the Government support the industry by providing research infrastructure, basic research and the ability to call on specialists to deal with problems that develop. I hope that we will have the Minister's assurance on that.

Following, but in no sense subordinate to, that is the much more close-to-market involvement of the Horticultural Development Council. This year, there is to be another poll to ratify, as it were, the continuation of that council. I hope that the Ministry will give as much lead as it properly can, and that the House will give a lead to the industry to ensure that the poll endorses the HDC's work. It is important not only for the cash that it raises and spends on behalf of the industry, but as a sign to all arms of government and to the marketing chain that growers take this matter seriously. They want the council to progress and be successful.

I should flag up the only fly in the ointment, as the National Farmers Union has mentioned it to me. The NFU is concerned that MAFF has recently cut funding for PhDs in this area. Perhaps the Minister will also comment on that. We need a continuing flow of high-quality people into the industry at doctorate and skilled technician level. This is not a task that can be done by second-rate people, at whatever level of their employment. It needs the best research brains and the best technologists trained to the highest level. The margins do not allow for anything other than that approach.

The third area where the market situation is relevant has an impact on the others. I am talking not about public money, but about the involvement of the supermarkets. Horticulture is distinctive because much, although not all, of its produce is sold to the consumer in a recognisable form—we can see an apple or a pear, but we cannot see the grain that an arable farmer produces because it is turned into bread. A high proportion of final output goes through the multiples. The NFU's estimate is that upwards of 75 per cent. goes through the multiples.

In many areas of agriculture—as in horticulture—there is a lively debate about the role of the multiples. I have always felt that megaphone diplomacy is unhelpful. One side tells the other that it is being ripped off, and there is no mutuality of interest. I believe that it does not matter how it is operated, or what the legal form of the contract is, but both parties—the grower and the supermarket—must work together to provide an acceptable and preferred product for the customer. There is an emphasis on working together, and that is positive, but it does not remove the need for fair treatment.

We should welcome the way in which the industry as a whole has worked together on product assurance, and has established crop protocols. Supermarkets should not, at the final point of sale, mix or dilute British produce that has been raised to that protocol level with a product imported from the European Union or elsewhere that has not been grown to that standard. In an ideal world, the British protocols should form the international standard for good practice for the production of the product in question. It is much better if British produce is marketed as British, unless it is not available on a continuing basis—one hopes that it will be.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): My hon. Friend is making an important point. One of the crucial elements of the intervention of the supermarkets is that they are increasingly and properly demanding higher standards from British growers. However, whenever they are short of British produce, they are quite willing to import products for which there is no guarantee that they meet the protocol on the use of pesticides or fertilisers. Will my hon. Friend comment on that?

Mr. Boswell: My hon. Friend is on to a very good point. That problem is of concern, and we need to find ways to prevent such practice.

We should also consider horticultural markets generally, because they comprise more than just supermarkets. I hope that MAFF will continue to seek practical opportunities to bring parties together to ensure that the horticultural market system, which has not worked as well as it might in the recent past, is rationalised, made efficient and provides an important additional service for the catering trade and specialist outlets that can best be served in that way.

I shall deal briefly with some of the concerns that are outside the narrowly agricultural sector. In the past two years, the strength of sterling has caused as many difficulties for growers as anything else. I do not intend, or have the time, to go on about that today. The state of the weather has also affected sales, as it has affected the growing experience.

I want to leave three specifics with the Minister. First, planning varies hugely from area to area. In areas where horticulture is understood, such as the Sussex plain or the fens, it is often easier to obtain planning permission than it is in areas adjoining major conurbations, such as South Ribble—I visited the constituency of the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow), who is present for the debate—or parts of the Vale of Evesham. I hope that the Minister will give the right guidance to his colleagues.

Secondly, I do not intend to rehearse the arguments about the national minimum wage and the fairness at work package, but three major conceptual problems in agriculture must be resolved in discussions. We must ensure that there is a proper fit with the Agricultural Wages Order 1998, which is not easy. There should be an acceptable form of treatment to produce a fair basis for piecework and for the analysis of rest periods. There should also be an acceptable way of keeping records. However responsible a gang master may be, if there are 50 people in a field, a practical way must be found of keeping score. That may get more complex when we get into the rest of the fairness at work package.

Thirdly, I have been surprised by the vehemence of representations on the pesticides tax. The Minister should acknowledge that huge progress has been made in integrated crop management and in crop protection, particularly for crops grown under glass in a glasshouse. It is completely incorrect to say—although people still believe it to be the case—that horticultural produce in this country is drenched in chemicals. There are likely to be fewer chemicals on a British product than on its imported equivalent, but, in any case, they will be controlled by statute and there is a strong commercial interest right across the sector for them to be reduced to a minimum.

We should also acknowledge that horticultural produce is offered directly and needs to be visually attractive. Pest control is a way of achieving that. Our concern is that the pesticide tax, if imposed, could be another imposition of costs without a matching benefit to the industry. Frankly, given the horticulture's present economic position, it could not take much more of that.

I readily acknowledge that Ministers cannot solve all those problems, certainly not this morning. However, they need to be seen to be caring about them, raising the profile of this important and excellent industry and, above all, consulting its practitioners on the best way of overcoming them.

11.28 am

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I welcome the opportunity to discuss horticulture. As a new Member, in the past 20 months, I have been struck by the extent to which the agriculture debate in the House has been dominated by areas of agriculture that are directly dependent on support either from the Government or through the common agricultural policy. I suppose that that is understandable, but horticulture is an important sector. The Government's involvement may not be as direct as it is in livestock or dairy farming or in the grain sector, but they could play a more proactive role in leading horticulture forward.

My constituency is mainly suburban, but parts of it that were previously represented by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) are dominated by a growing horticultural sector. The villages of Banks, Tarleton and Hesketh Bank have, for many generations, been market gardening. They have produced vegetable and salad crops, and there are many glasshouses.

It is interesting to note the way in which the industry has changed over the past 20 or 30 years, and the reasons for the problems that have arisen. When I first went to live in Preston in the mid-1970s, it was said that the cheapest fresh produce in the country could be found there, because of the town's wholesale market and its proximity to market gardening in west Lancashire and Fylde. During the past 20 or 30 years, however, there has been a change in the way in which the horticulture sector sells its products. Little of the produce of market gardeners and salad crop growers is now sold through the wholesale market; the vast majority is sold directly to the supermarket chains, a handful of which effectively control the salad and vegetable market.

Another effect has been the consolidation of the sector. Many of the small family enterprises—such as small family farms—that existed 20 or 30 years ago have disappeared. Smallholdings that existed in my constituency then have since been sold. Some are operating as part of a larger company, while others have had houses built on them, and are not producing anything. Although there are still many small growers in my constituency, the industry there is dominated by five larger growers, the biggest of which—a company called Huntapak—employs some 300 people. Many small growers are therefore at a disadvantage in negotiations with supermarkets.

Only last weekend, I talked to a couple of growers in Hesketh Bank about lettuce growing in Lancashire, and the relationship with supermarkets. Many growers are not big enough to have direct contracts with supermarkets; a lorry comes round, each of them puts a certain number of boxes on to it, and it goes to the supermarket. If the first box from the first grower is opened and its contents are not considered to be up to scratch, it is not uncommon for not just that grower's boxes but the whole consignment to be returned, and to end up being ploughed into the ground and wasted.

I regularly hear of growers in my area being paid 8p or 9p per cauliflower, and then seeing them priced at 60p in the supermarket. They would like a better relationship between the two amounts, but they are reluctant to put their criticisms on record, because they depend on contracts with the supermarkets.

I have been investigating supply chain networks in my constituency. Huntapak has land in East Anglia where it grows carrots, which are sent to Lancashire to be processed at its plant in Tarleton. They are then sent, in little boxes, to supermarket warehouses in Birmingham or London, ending up—probably—on supermarket shelves in Norwich or Southport. One wonders how much of the shelf price reflects the cost of moving fresh produce around the country. In many supermarkets—certainly in my part of Lancashire—it is virtually impossible to buy salad crops and vegetables that were grown within 20 miles of Preston, although some of the best in the country are. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to know where the produce that is available has come from. Serious questions must be asked about the role of supermarkets, and the way in which the industry is to develop.

As I know from speaking to growers, the situation is difficult. Farmers, by their nature, are very independent, and, unlike farmers in the rest of Europe, have no tradition of co-operation. Given that the retail sector is now dominated by a handful of major retailers, the producing sector must try to find a mechanism to remove the imbalance between producer and retailer. The classic market forces mechanism has led to an unfair market consisting of a multiplicity of small growers and a handful of major purchasers. I do not know how much of a role

[Mr. David Borrow]

the Government can have, but the industry must consider how it can become competitive vis-a-vis the supermarket chains. As there are pressures on the supermarkets to sell food as cheaply as possible, they exert downward pressures on their suppliers, who are in a weak negotiating position.

Let me mention some minor issues, some of which have already been referred to. One is training in horticulture. Lancashire Growers, an employer-supported organisation based in Banks, in my constituency, but with members in several Lancashire constituencies, has operated a training agency for many years. Unfortunately, pressure is being exerted through the training and enterprise councils to reduce not the number of places, but the amount that is available per trainee. That makes it difficult for small training organisations to carry out first-class training.

The number of horticulture trainees is not vast. We are talking not about establishing engineering training courses in the middle of towns and cities but about agricultural communities, and the need to ensure that training is available in young people's localities, where they live and work. I fear that, if the pressure continues, Lancashire will lose local training opportunities provided through local agencies. I shall not go into more detail, as I shall pursue the issue elsewhere, but I wanted to flag it up.

Others have mentioned planning conflicts. During the short time in which I have been an MP, I have been involved in a number of planning disputes, many of which have arisen in the villages of Tarleton, Banks and Hesketh Bank. Villages which, a generation or two ago, were essentially farming villages—albeit with a reasonable population and fairly high employment in the growing industry—are now becoming both agricultural and suburban. People who work in Preston, Manchester or Liverpool but live in those villages expect to find what they would find in a suburb of a major city, rather than hearing enormous trailers delivering produce, or returning empty, in the middle of the night. There will always be nuisance, conflict and difficulty when an agricultural industry co-exists with domestic, suburban-style village life.

One of my concerns is that a number of companies in my constituency have grown out of the agricultural sector and are now involved in packaging or such industries. They were set up usually in a shed on a farm to supply a product that was needed by the horticultural sector. They have been successful and developed, but they face planning constraints as to whether they continue to exist, even in those villages where they grew. If they do not continue, what happens to the people who live in those villages and work in those industries? The conflicts in relation to that matter are interesting. Perhaps guidance in those sectors would be useful.

One of the remarkable things that arose in the meetings that I had with growers is that wage levels are above the minimum wage. That is not an issue. In my constituency, the unemployment rate is about 1.8 per cent., so we are not talking about a vast number of unemployed people, but I know of growers who have struggled to fill their vacancies. They have worked through jobcentres and many of the people whom they have recruited have been from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire—from Skelmersdale and such areas. The difficulty has been getting people who have been out of work and have no tradition of working in the agricultural industry to do what is expected of them in the agricultural industry.

Few people in my constituency would want to work in agriculture who do not already do so. Therefore, the industry recruits from urban areas. In doing so, it recruits people with no tradition of working in the industry. The Employment Service needs to recognise that in terms of the support that it gives. In addition, when people, particularly youngsters, are recruited into the industry, there needs to be follow-up support from the service, recognising the difficulty when people get involved in a work culture that is different from what they would normally expect in an urban area.

There is the difficulty of finding accommodation for people in the agricultural sector on relatively low wages. I am sure that Conservative Members will have similar problems to those which I have experienced. Many people who work in agriculture and were brought up in the industry have to move out of the area and commute 20 miles each day because no property is available in the agricultural villages where they were born within the price range that they can afford.

I make a general point that follows from many of the discussions that I have had with the sector. I recognise that the Government's role is not one of giving big subsidies. The sector expects to compete and to compete fairly, but there are concerns that the regime throughout Europe is not all together fair.

On issues such as pesticides and fuel taxation, there is concern that the climate on this side of the English channel should also exist on the other side. It is difficult when imports of salad goods or vegetables from Spain or Holland can come to the UK and undercut those of our producers. They can do that because of conditions that have been influenced by Government decisions in those countries, which make it difficult for UK producers to compete. The onus is on the Government to seek a level playing field across Europe, so that our growers can compete with growers in the rest of Europe.

11.44 am

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I want to be brief because other hon. Members wish to speak.

I emphasise the fact that the horticulture industry is big. It employs many people. If the threats to employment in horticulture arose in some other industries, there would be a huge furore in the press and so on.

The minimum wage issue is important, not because anyone is trying to run out on his or her obligations, but because of the difficulty that, if employers pay piece rates, one person may decide that he or she wants to earn as much as possible and spend 10 minutes eating a sandwich, and someone else may decide that it is a lovely afternoon and spend two hours eating one. It is difficult to police.

If the minimum wage is to be calculated on so many hours a day, it gives a terrific bonus to those people who do not want to do any work and may be below the minimum wage level because they have not done any work—not because the money is not there for the taking. Ministers need to look at that carefully.

I should like to raise again an issue that I have often raised. When he was the Minister responsible for social security, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead

(Mr. Field) came to my constituency and had a look at the problems. There is an absurd difficulty that it sometimes takes up to six weeks for people to get back into the social security system if they have left work because they think that there will be the opportunity for picking.

If there is no picking because it rains all the time, those people have a problem. They are not the ones with savings; they do not have any savings to rely on. Many people in my constituency who would like to go picking are saying that it is not worth the candle. We need to look at that matter because they want to work, and they would be happy to work, but the meshing with the social security system makes it extraordinarily difficult for them to do so.

The quotas on foreign pickers—foreign students coming in to pick—need to be re-examined. I share the Government's general view that work permits should not be given for jobs that could easily be filled in Britain. That is wholly appropriate, but, again and again, pickers cannot be found among the local population; they simply are not there.

Many of my farmers, some of whom have a wages bill of £1 million a year, are finding themselves wholly dependent on the reliable work that is done by foreign students and others who have come in because they have a vested interest in getting as much pay as they can and taking it home. I hope that the Minister will look carefully at that issue.

The issue of distribution costs is important. The hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) painted a graphic picture of the pilgrimage of a carrot across the United Kingdom. If the Government continue to push up the price of fuel, the costs of distribution will mount rapidly—much more rapidly than the industry can possibly support.

I should like the Minister to have a careful look at planning regulations. I understand—the point has been made by one of the growers in my constituency—that the waist-high troughs in which, for example, strawberries are grown and which make picking and disease control much easier and so on, may be subject to formal planning regulation that is out of date. Apparently, if a crop is grown whose roots are not in the soil, growers face the full rigour of planning regulation. That must be negotiable, but we perhaps need some help from the Government on it.

I should like to reiterate that very big growers in my constituency and neighbouring areas are frightened of making any form of recognisable complaint about the way in which they are treated by supermarkets. There should be some mechanism to enable people to blow the whistle on supermarkets which, from time to time, abuse their market power and treat growers badly. That does not happen all the time; many of my growers are dependent, and happy to be dependent, on the efforts by supermarkets to drive up quality and all the rest of it. However, when things go wrong, supermarkets can rely on the fact that growers are not prepared to complain because the market to which they can go is tiny. That really does matter.

Finally, I have an entirely constituency point. Brogdale, the site of the national apple and pear collection, has made and is making bold attempts to break out of a debt incurred when the estate was bought, when the market was at its highest conceivable point. Even by the time the negotiations had been finally completed, the estate's value had fallen by about 25 per cent., and it then fell well below that. The debt was colossal.

An element in the debt, over which the Minister has control, is the fact that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, under its regulations, is fully entitled to claim back part of any planning gain that may be negotiated on a part of the estate. If Ministers felt able to assist Brogdale in that way, a valuable national asset—not just in historical and tourist terms, but in terms of genetic development—would be much assisted. After all, MAFF received a huge price for the estate in the first place—an unrealistically high price. I would be grateful if the Minister would look carefully at that matter.

11.51 am

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I welcome a debate on horticulture, which is important to Cornwall and my constituency. Horticulture has clearly faced a difficult year, for a variety of reasons, such as the strength of the pound and the weather, to which reference has been made, which resulted in a lack of demand for items such as salad crops and garden plants. Little can be done about climatic disadvantages which visit us from time to time, but the main difficulty lies with the fact that we are increasingly trading in a global market.

Everywhere in Britain, we are subjected to the rigours of a global marketplace, and that manifests itself in two ways. One is the change in consumer habits. The fact that so many more people now go on holiday abroad has promoted their desire for more exotic fruits and vegetables. Secondly, supermarkets have increasingly responded to the opportunities of global marketing. They can purchase fruit and vegetables all year round, regardless of the season, and that has undermined domestic production.

The environmental impact has been seen in so-called food miles. Transporting large quantities of fruit and vegetables in order to comply with supermarkets' desire for a distribution network that provides them with the means of supplying their stores in the most competitive way has an environmental impact.

All that has meant that, recently, the United Kingdom has become a net importer of fruit and vegetables. There is now a huge gap between the value of imported fruit and vegetables and home-grown fruit and vegetables. In 1996–97, the value of imported fruit was estimated at £1.5 billion, and that of home-grown fruit at about £240 million.

The major multiples are taking a larger share of the retail market, perhaps up to as much as 75 per cent. Their central purchasing and distribution systems give importers easy access to outlets capable of handling large volumes of produce. Such volumes are necessary to provide the competitive edge for the importer from abroad and the supermarkets. The supermarkets are now the main force in the marketplace. They give consumers a wide variety of fresh fruit and vegetables. We can now eat strawberries all year round.

Strawberries form an important part of the soft fruit growing in my constituency, and some of the contracts that have been drawn up between strawberry growers and supermarkets have been alarming, forward purchasing vast quantities of strawberries and tying up huge acreages so that strawberry growers really have only one marketplace. Strangely enough, written into those contracts is a sale-or-return clause. If strawberries are not

[Mr. Colin Breed]

going well, or if there is a bit of a glut, a supermarket can telephone its grower saying that, unless the grower prefers them to go in the bin, it intends to return them.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I am concerned not just about the sale-or-return clause, but about the way in which supermarkets are dictating a specific type of strawberry. The small sweet English strawberry has virtually died out, not because it is not a better product and people do not like to eat it, but because supermarkets prefer the large strawberry with a longer shelf life which is typically grown in California or Spain. Therefore, they dictate the product as well as the terms that the hon. Gentleman points out.

Mr. Breed: I entirely agree. A longer shelf life is often coupled with the fact that the strawberry tastes like wet blotting paper—no taste at all.

Often, strawberries are not returned to the growers but are consigned to waste, and the grower has to bear the cost because, if he does not want to operate on those terms, or if he kicks up a fuss, he is unlikely to get a contract next time. His opportunities to sell elsewhere are extremely limited.

Growers are squeezed by supermarkets' demands in a variety of ways. Not only do they require products of a certain size, shape and colour, with a particular packaging, but they use the domination of their purchasing departments. In the Tamar valley, one of the premier soft fruit-growing areas in the country, the decline of small shops in Devon and Cornwall diminished growers' opportunities to market their crops. Their ability to sell into the large supermarkets has also diminished because of the amount and type of strawberry that they produce and its seasonality.

The idea that the UK is now a net importer of fruit and vegetables does not lie happily with the concept of a food standards agency. Food producers in other EU countries are not subject to the stringent health and safety regulations imposed on UK producers, particularly with regard to fertilisers and pesticides. Therefore, major retailers are often better off importing fruit and vegetables from other EU countries. That will cause some headaches for the way in which a food standards agency will police some of the products that are increasingly being sold in our multiples.

In addition, climatic conditions in other EU countries, such as the Mediterranean, mean that producers in Spain, Portugal and Italy have an inherent advantage. The UK horticulture industry can survive in an increasingly global marketplace only through innovation. That is where the Government may be able to help. There are opportunities to market specific crops in an innovative way and to produce specific crops for specific markets. I highlight the success of the flower growing industry on the isles of Scilly. It has recognised that it has large competitors in Europe and on the mainland, but it has marketed itself. Scilly flowers, a definable and developing product, are now sold directly, rather than through the multiples or the marketplace.

There is a clear opportunity for those involved in organic produce. That is a growing market in which huge amounts are imported, but, if we get our act together, innovation should allow Britain to produce more.

The Horticultural Development Council is an important element in ensuring that the necessary research and development goes into creating an innovative approach to the challenges that face the industry. Some improvements may be necessary. Added impetus is needed for organisations that will help the industry to innovate and compete properly.

Many residents complain to me about the difference between use and scale in planning applications. Many operations had their planning use agreed many years ago, but the scale of such operations, particularly to meet the demands of the large multiples, means that increasing quantities are being produced on the same amounts of land. That means heavier traffic and increased disruption to the site. The planning authorities need to consider not just the use of land, but the scale of use, because that important aspect of the process is not taken into account.

12.1 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I am grateful for the opportunity to refer to seven issues that have been raised by the horticulture industry in my area. West Sussex is one of the largest areas of activity in the industry, with several thousand employees, many of whom are from my constituency. The area concentrates on the glasshouse side of the industry, which requires heavy capital investment. The smaller producers can survive only in a niche environment. Many of the large producers, who already use robotics and other new production methods, are trading at very narrow margins, despite having taken all the business decisions that they can to survive.

The minimum wage and working time directive have added substantial costs to the industry and brought confusion and conflict with the Agricultural Wages Board. Those problems need to be sorted out. The glasshouse industry feels that the Agricultural Wages Board is no longer relevant to it.

Finance at universities has been mentioned. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has contributed £1.5 million a year and PhDs have been regarded as crucial conduits into the new technology aspects of the industry. That finance is being phased out, but the same conduit is needed if we are to keep up.

I am advised that there are delays in getting new and better pesticides because of the high cost of label registration, which can be up to £50,000 per registration in this country, as against £6,000 in France and only £1,000 in Spain. There should be no political divisions over EU harmonisation on that issue. As has already been said, the industry does not regard the proposed pesticide tax as necessary, because it is already minimising the use of pesticides. There is a particular problem with methyl bromide, the steriliser of land, which was to be phased out in 2005. The Government have advanced the date to 2000, but there is no replacement for that product. If one is not available by 2000, the ban will have to be deferred.

We have had problems of foreign produce, grown with pesticides, appearing in local boxes and being mistested in supermarkets and identified as UK-sourced. Surely supermarket testing should be done at the depot so that it is clear where produce has come from. The rules on pesticides are more lax elsewhere. Consumers should know whether the food that they buy in the supermarket has been grown under the higher standards in force in the UK or has come from somewhere else with lower standards.

I am delighted to hear that the Scilly flower industry is doing well. Flowers are a huge growth industry at outlets, increasing by more than 30 per cent. per annum, but UK grower participation is stagnant, if not declining, because of the different levels of VAT in Europe. I believe that 11 member states have substantially lower VAT rates on flowers, making it hard for our producers to compete. The high-tech flower growers in my part of the world have margins of less than 2 per cent. They will not be investing any further capital. We have also heard about clear cases of planning getting in the way of productivity.

After spending two days with those in our industry, I wrote to Lord Donoughue, the Minister with responsibility for horticulture, setting out my points in greater detail. I was disappointed that my request for a meeting has not been granted and there is no apparent intention to do so. I should like to conclude cheekily by suggesting that if the noble Lord thinks that the issue will not be his responsibility for much longer, he should get a move on. If he thinks that he is going to stay at the Ministry, he should realise that the industry needs a Minister who will listen to it and understand its problems. This is not a party issue.

12.5 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I am delighted to be able to contribute to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) for securing it.

My constituency is richly horticultural. It can justly claim to be the food production centre of the UK, although other hon. Members might contest that—I see one or two waving their heads about—and claim an equal share to that title.

As well as food, my area produces a large number of bulbs and cut flowers. Many people are familiar with the Spalding flower parade and festival. The skills, enterprise, energy and initiative that contribute to that advertisement for my constituency are also prevalent in the horticultural enterprise there. A great deal of innovative and imaginative work is going on in the cut flower and bulb industries, from both glasshouse and outdoor producers.

Against that background, I should like to raise three points in the few minutes at my disposal. The first concerns research and development, which has already been mentioned. I am sure that all hon. Members share my welcome for the Government's commitment to the Horticultural Research Institute at Kirton. However, I have two questions for the Minister. How does that £1.7 million investment compare with our principal competitors; and will the project be extended when it reaches the end of its life? We are in the fourth year of a five-year programme. What plans are there to extend the project or replace it with something similar?

My second point is on marketing. We have heard a lot about the need for collaborative marketing, which I endorse. Although the UK is the home of gardening, the industry is sometimes seen as small scale and peripheral compared with those in Holland and other countries, so it requires Government support. I think that the industry would acknowledge that the HDC is doing an excellent job, even though levy-based organisations are never particularly popular. However, we need marketing funds and programmes to allow our industry to take advantage of some of the export opportunities in Europe and elsewhere. The HDC should be given a boost by Government support.

My third point is about competition. Part of the problem is that many of our competitor countries enjoy more indulgent fiscal regimes. Payment terms are more generous and it is easier for their industries to start up, to survive and to export. Spanish producers of apples, strawberries and cauliflowers are nibbling away at the edge of our market because of their climatic advantage and putting our producers under enormous pressure.

Some say that the answer is to opt for niche market specialism, but that makes producers more fragile. Relying on a targeted niche market means that a producer cannot go in and out of a product according to economic circumstances. The ability to switch products year by year has always given growers and farmers financial and economic insulation. The focus, targeting and capital investment that niche market production necessitates removes that.

Finally, on the subject of retailers, I can say little that has not been said already, but I want to amplify some of the comments made by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Surely it is wrong that the profit margin of a typical retailer, for example, a supermarket, in the ornamental cut flower market can be between 25 and 30 per cent. when the pre-packer and the grower are making between 2 and 5 per cent. profit—a generous estimate in many cases. It is nonsensical that contracts setting retail prices cover periods of between six months and 18 months, regardless of any changes in cost prices; and that the consumer therefore pays the same price, regardless of the plight of the producer.

That matter requires Government attention. Discussions taking place with the British Retail Consortium must establish not only binding agreements but proper systems for auditing and monitoring commitments made by the BRC's members in respect of procurement and labelling of British products. I hope to hear a commitment on that from the Minister today.

12.11 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) on having obtained this debate—I cannot remember when we last had a debate solely on horticulture. The industry is a large one, running from field-scale vegetables and salad crops—for example, hundreds of acres of celery, lettuce and other salad crops are grown in my constituency—to ornamentals and nursery stock. There are many issues that affect the industry; some are unique to individual sectors, whereas others are more general.

Let us examine the overall health of the industry. As my hon. Friend said, it operates mainly in the free market. It receives little or no support from the British Government or from any other European Government, although the European aid for marketing schemes for producer groups is welcome and I am glad that the take-up rate has been high. This week's edition of "Horticulture Week" reports that the findings of the latest Plimsoll portfolio analysis of horticulture show that 27 per cent. of companies failed to make any profit in 1997; and that an examination of accounts from slightly more than 2,000 horticultural companies shows that 591 companies have above-average borrowings and three quarters of the latter are in financial difficulties. The overall picture of the horticulture sector is not entirely one of blooming roses, although some sectors have done better than others.

[Mr. James Paice]

Horticulture is important to the British economy and to trade—the figures have already been quoted, so I need not repeat them—but some sectors have now been contracting for several years. That contraction is most severe in the top-fruit sector: apple output has declined by almost one third over the past 20 years, and the area covered by apple orchards has almost halved. Apples were once grown extensively in my constituency, but there are now only a few vestiges left of the old orchards. This country is now only 36 per cent. self-sufficient in apples. Tomato output is fairly stable, but our self-sufficiency is now only 28 per cent. and continues to decline, despite huge investment in new glasshouses, such as the one opened last summer by the then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), which is the largest in the United Kingdom. We have to look for ways both to arrest the decline in those sectors and to help other sectors to thrive.

Yesterday, the National Farmers Union ran its "proud to serve British" reception in the Members' Dining Room of the House of Commons. At that event, Lord Donoughue, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, lauded British produce, which was welcome; however, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said, the Minister's record on supporting horticulture on other occasions is lamentable. An article in the journal "Fresh Produce" dated 16 October 1998 starts:

"Probably the least surprising feature of next week's Marden Fruit Show is that horticulture minister Lord Donoughue will not be attending."

It notes that the Minister

"has consistently dodged trade events . . . since he took up office."

That does not smack of great support from the Minister with responsibility for the industry.

Our fair deal for farming campaign applies equally to horticulture. Imported fruit and vegetables should be produced to the standards required here: no produce should be imported into this country for British consumers if it has been treated with chemicals that are banned in this country. I hope that the Government will take action to ensure that that happens.

That brings me to the subject of the pesticides tax. We realise that that proposal is driven by the Treasury and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but I hope that the Minister will tell us what MAFF's attitude is. In Whitehall, is the Ministry standing up for farmers and growers? Is it being made clear to the Treasury that no farmer or grower uses expensive pesticides unnecessarily; and that a tax will not reduce pesticide usage, but will merely raise growers' costs? It should also be borne in mind that consumers might not want the misshapen or slightly less attractive produce that may result if the use of pesticides is reduced or abandoned.

The main issue mentioned by almost every speaker today is the impact of the minimum wage and the working time directive, especially in respect of casual workers, who are extremely important to the horticulture industry. Such workers have been recognised by the Agricultural Wages Board for many years. They are engaged to work by the hour or by the day; there is no continuity of work guaranteed; and they are paid by the day, often through piecework rates. Only if they are employed continuously for 20 weeks do they become classified as being in regular employment.

Such workers are drawn from sections of the population who actually want to work in that way. Many of them are itinerant people: in my area, travellers coming to pick crops in the right season are part of our history. However, there is a particular group, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), of workers who operate under the terms of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. They are foreign students, mainly from central and eastern Europe, who come to this country with Home Office consent under a scheme that is registered by the Home Office as a youth mobility and cultural exchange scheme. Ten thousand such students come each year and many employers, including some in my constituency, employ tens or even hundreds of them, often providing accommodation for them as well. Without those workers, lettuces would not be cut and fruit would not be picked.

The simple fact is that those students want to work. They are motivated by a good work ethic and by sums of money that they could never dream of earning at home. The money they can earn in one summer here can set them up for life, enabling them to buy a house in their home country. It has been impossible to obtain British workers for those jobs, despite sterling efforts by the Employment Service, which I encouraged when I was a Minister in the Department of Employment.

That scheme is now under threat: the AWB proposes that, after 13 weeks, such workers should cease to be classified as casual and the working time regulations and the minimum wage be brought to bear. Let me quote from a briefing kindly given to me by Boxford Suffolk Farms Ltd., which is a large producer of top-fruit used for Copella apple juice. In 1998, it employed more than 1,500 people under the scheme to help with the harvest. The company states:

"The present procedure is for the worker to sign the Daily Work Sheet on the field at the beginning of the day, but they are then free to work the hours that they want, when they want and for however long they want. If they feel like walking away and not returning then they are free to do so . . . This is how the majority of the casual workers like it, it gives them flexibility.

However, if we are now to pay holiday pay then this will have to be carefully monitored thus adding cost and administrative burden to the operation. If, indeed, it is possible to police at all."

The company also sent me a costing, although the House will be relieved to hear that I shall not go into the details, because I must allow time for the Minister to respond to the debate. Based on the 1998 statistics, the company has worked out that there would be an overall increase in the per head cost of employing such students of 34.5 per cent. No business can afford that, so the proposed changes jeopardise the industry's ability to get the crops harvested.

Several issues have been raised in the debate about this important industry, of which casual work and the Agricultural Wages Board are by far the most urgent, and I hope that the Minister will tell us what MAFF is doing to address those questions. I know that he will stress the independence of the wages board, but we want to know whether MAFF is making representations on behalf of growers to ensure that, in its review of casual workers, the board understands the horticulture industry's need to have ready access to such people.

12.20 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): This has been an interesting and a pleasant debate in which hon. Members from both sides of the House have spoken about an industry that makes a great contribution to British food supplies. I suspect that many of us have been associated with the industry at some time. Although I did not make enough money to buy a house, when I was about 19 and an industrial engineering apprentice in central Birmingham, I spent a fortnight's holiday fruit picking in Scotland. It was a totally different life. So, although I was not treated as a foreigner, I am familiar with the joys and the difficulties of fruit picking.

It is clearly impossible for me to respond to many of the points raised in the debate, so I shall pick and choose. I promise to write to hon. Members regarding any points of substance that I do not cover. I had hoped to respond more positively to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), who mentioned Brogdale, as I was fairly convinced that I would be able to announce a decision. However, although one sees the papers and agrees the decision, such matters take a while to progress through the Ministry. We must protect public funds and MAFF must obtain a planning gain. I assure the hon. Gentleman that that will be done positively, and we hope to make an announcement as quickly as possible.

I shall not repeat the points raised by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) in introducing this subject. I congratulate him on obtaining this debate about a very important industry that is worth almost £2 billion at farm gate level. Every hon. Member who has spoken has extolled the virtues of the industry and its excellent, wholesome and diverse produce. Although the Government do not tell people what to eat, we urge them to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables—and preferably those grown in Britain. I suspect that the common market policemen will criticise me for that remark.

I congratulate the National Farmers Union and retailers on initiating the assured produce scheme, in which 70 per cent. of British producers and retailers participate. MAFF is not involved in the scheme as the Government do not necessarily play a part in those sorts of relationships. It is as plain as a pikestaff that home-grown British fruit and vegetables are fresher than imports. However, hon. Members referred to national cycles as a result of supermarket distribution throughout the country and we know that people want to buy exotic fruits and vegetables that we cannot grow in Britain.

There is dynamism in the industry and we applaud grower ingenuity. We are world leaders in horticulture and are responsible for much ground-breaking technology. Tasty small British strawberries can be grown almost the whole year round as a result of research and development that is funded by MAFF and the industry. People soon realise that the big imported strawberries do not have a taste—I just wish that they would do so sooner.

I reject the attacks upon my noble Friend Lord Donoughue. It is nonsense to claim that he does not speak in support of British produce when he did so just the other day. My noble Friend certainly gets around the country. It may surprise Opposition Members to learn that, because the Labour party has more trouble winning votes in the other place, the whipping regime in the House of Lords is much more severe than in this place. Despite that, however, my noble Friend is doing a good job on behalf of the industry.

I do not deal with horticultural issues on a daily basis, but I was astonished to learn last November that I was the first serving MAFF Minister to visit Spitalfields market since its relocation to Waltham Forest in 1991. It is a major market which distributes both imported and home-grown produce throughout the country. It has a turnover of £400 million a year and is a major distributor of food to the catering industry—a particular growth area to which many hon. Members referred.

I hope that I have applauded the assured produce scheme sufficiently. Although some hon. Members have mentioned the minimum wage's impact on the industry, more hon. Members have referred to the possibility of a pesticide tax. That is a very important issue. Page 13 of last week's edition of *Farming Weekly* carries a story about my right hon. Friend's address to the Soil Association conference. It states:

"The Minister also told delegates that pesticide taxes were not the best way to protect the environment from pollution. Such taxes would merely increase the cost of pesticides."

Between 1986 and 1996, the tonnage of pesticides used in this country was reduced by 15 per cent. We have a ruthless regime for the control, monitoring and surveillance of pesticide use in Britain. The working party on pesticides—which is somewhat more than a working party; it is not a casual ad hoc arrangement—took 1,000 samples of fruit and vegetables from around the country, imports and exports, to check the level of pesticides. The quantities vary each year. It conducted tens of thousands of tests on the produce, checking for pesticide residue. It found no residue in 70 per cent. of the samples and detected minimal residue levels in about 30 per cent. Its discovery that less than 1 per cent. of samples contained residue above the minimum level resulted from its targeting of particularly dodgy areas. However, all samples were well within safety limits.

The Government recognise concern about the impact of a tax, especially on the economic competitiveness of the agriculture industry. I shall share with the House the contents of a paper from the Agricultural Development Advisory Service which recently came across my desk—and which will no doubt be published in due course—outlining a qualitative assessment of the impact of a pesticide tax. It said that pesticide taxation will not necessarily reduce pesticide usage or offer environmental benefits. With more focus on cost, farmers will use the older, cheaper and often less environmentally friendly products, and there might be an increase in the use of less well evaluated pesticide mixtures.

According to the paper, the repeated use of a narrow range of cheaper products would increase the risk of pesticide resistance. Pesticide taxation would stimulate greater demand for research into application techniques. Nitrate leaching would increase and farmers might adopt weed control strategies that are more dependent on cultural methods, many of which are more damaging to wildlife than herbicide use.

The introduction of a pesticide tax may reduce sea bed quality, and spillages and exposure to treated seeds will lead to increased potential damage to wildlife, including farmland birds. A pesticide tax would increase the amount of pesticides imported for own use and, as a consequence,

[Mr. Jeff Rooker]

larger quantities of pesticides would be stored on farms, possibly in sub-standard conditions. Reduced profitability would decrease the amount of investment in new machinery, which would be beneficial to the operating environment.

I make no apology for relating a one-sided view of the argument. I make it absolutely clear that MAFF Ministers are fully seized of the upside and the downside of a pesticide tax. It may sound superficially attractive as a way of reducing pesticide use, but, perversely, it may have the opposite effect. Such a tax may lead to the use of not only more, but more damaging, pesticides. We are not prepared to tolerate that threat to the safety of the food chain.

In the minute remaining, I shall turn to research and development. We spend what might be alleged to be a disproportionate amount of MAFF's research and development budget on horticulture, and we make no apologies for that. By and large, the industry receives no support from common market subsidies. We are therefore very pleased to contribute between £11 million and £17 million—depending on whether we add in the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council money—and we hope to continue that funding.

I regret the changes that we were forced to make to educational grants, but that is a matter for the Department for Education and Employment to address, given the constraints of the comprehensive spending review. I regret also that I have not been able to respond to all the points raised in the debate.

Road Deaths (Sentencing)

12.30 pm

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): I am pleased to have this opportunity to raise an important issue that attracts widespread concern from Members in all parties. I intend to speak for 10 minutes at most, to enable colleagues to contribute to the debate before the Minister has an opportunity to respond.

On 12 January 1998, a 16-year-old constituent of mine, Livia Galli-Atkinson, left home at five to seven in the evening to walk the 800 yards to attend her regular ballet class at the Boden Studios in Enfield. On Windmill hill, Livia was hit by a Mercedes car that mounted the pavement, struck a signpost and injured another woman pedestrian. Half an hour later, Livia died.

Last March, Livia's mother wrote in *The Sunday Times* of her and her family's feelings. She said:

"Our petite 16-year-old daughter was lying on a pavement . . . with a broken pelvis, a bleeding face, torn little ears and a gashed underlip, her front teeth smashed as a result of the car's bottom scraping against her face. She died of severe head injuries in the arms of strangers, while her supper was being made at home."

Livia's parents, Giulietta and George, and her sister Bianca have shown great dignity, courage and determination during the past 12 months. Their cause has captured the imagination of the people of Enfield and beyond. In November 1998, the driver of the Mercedes was found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving. His sentence consisted of a £2,000 fine and a five-year driving ban.

Today's short debate focuses on the sentences given in such cases. I draw the attention of the House to the cross-party early-day motion 201. The motion contrasts the average penalty of 33.7 months in cases of causing death by dangerous driving with the average penalty of 62 months in manslaughter cases.

Many important issues are raised by my constituents' case. Many of them are matters for the Home Office and others are the concern of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Today, I want to concentrate on sentencing.

Road Peace is the national charity which campaigns for justice for those who have lost their lives in road cases and for their bereaved families. Road Peace has launched the campaign for justice for road traffic victims and has been instrumental in forming an all-party parliamentary group on that subject. Its concern, and mine, is that the pattern of sentencing across the country is too lenient.

The number of prosecutions following road deaths has fallen since the implementation of the Road Traffic Act 1991. In 1996, the last year for which I have figures, 3,598 people were killed on the roads. In 382 of those cases, someone was charged with causing death by dangerous driving, and 245 of those people were convicted.

It is clear from my research that the Crown Prosecution Service demonstrates a marked reluctance even to use the charge of causing death by dangerous driving. Incredibly, for cases involving the lesser charge—driving without due care and attention—no statistics are kept for the number of drivers who kill or cause serious injury. That is unacceptable. I ask the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for

Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), to consider whether we can provide statistics that make that distinction, so that we know of cases involving death or serious injury. I ask also that the Government consider publishing those statistics more frequently.

The maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving is 10 years' imprisonment and a mandatory disqualification from driving, yet sentences tend to be considerably more lenient. Very few convictions carry a sentence of more than two years in prison, let alone anything close to 10 years. In one in three cases, including the case of Livia, the driver is not disqualified, despite the existence of that provision. That pattern of leniency brings the legal system into grave disrepute and undermines public confidence in the courts. How can we expect drivers to take those issues seriously if the courts and the law appear not to do so?

I support the long-standing recommendation of the North committee that the courts should have the power to take account of the consequences of a road traffic offence when sentencing. Indeed, I would go further and say that we should require the courts to do so. It is incredible that the courts ignore death when it is a consequence in such cases.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister inform the House what progress has been made in reviewing the Road Traffic Act 1988? That issue was raised in an Adjournment debate last May by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt). I am aware that these matters are dealt with by the DETR but clearly they have great significance for today's debate. In last May's debate, my hon. Friend said that

"a car is not merely a personal convenience, but a lethal weapon."—[*Official Report*, 13 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 341.]

In that context, surely it is not only drivers' responsibility to drive carefully but the law's responsibility to provide suitable deterrents to prevent the tragic loss of life that I have described today.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provides a possible method for dealing with these important issues. The Act established a sentencing advisory panel, which will be empowered to issue guidelines to the courts with the aim of promoting consistency of good practice across the country.

Will the Minister today at least consider referring the matter of road deaths to the sentencing advisory panel? If he is able to do so, today or shortly, will he urge the panel to consult widely in reviewing the sentencing guidelines in cases of road death and, in particular, to consult the bereaved families and friends and reputable organisations working in the field, most notably Road Peace? In referring the matter to the panel, the Government would send a powerful signal that the Home Office is listening to public concerns expressed in the House and is ready to act on them.

Giulietta, George and Bianca Galli-Atkinson are here today listening to the debate. Earlier, I joined them and colleagues from other parties to deliver a letter and petition to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in Downing street. It is now one year and one hour since Livia Galli-Atkinson was buried. Today's debate is dedicated to her memory and the memory of the thousands of others who have lost their lives and their bereaved families. I hope that it will provide an opportunity for the House to send a clear, powerful message to the courts that leniency in road death cases is unacceptable and the time is right for clear, tough sentencing guidelines. None of that will bring Livia back, but I hope that it will mean that she did not die in vain.

12.39 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on securing this important debate, and I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to catch your eye.

I, too, have a sad case to relate. It is one of many of which I have now become aware. On 10 June 1997, David Burrows, a 15-year-old, was walking home when he was struck by a speeding car and killed instantly. It happened a very short distance from where I live. His father Keith has been working tirelessly—just as we heard from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate that the parents of the victim in his constituency did—and in December I also delivered a large petition signed by people, not only in my constituency, but from a wider area.

The driver convicted of David's death, who was found to have caused death by dangerous driving, did not receive any form of custodial sentence. In the view of the people who signed the petition, it was a derisory sentence, and this is just one of thousands of similar cases. I suggest that it is time for the courts to send a clear message that causing death by dangerous driving is a very serious offence, and sentences must reflect that.

12.41 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on raising this subject. I have been a patron of the charity Road Peace for several years, and I am pleased to have been asked to chair the all-party group campaigning for justice for road traffic victims and their families.

Some years ago, I gave evidence to the Law Commission for a study that resulted in the report entitled, "Involuntary Manslaughter". I believe that, alongside the suggestions made by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate, that report may provide a course of action for the Home Office to consider. The proposal is that there ought to be a new crime that has an application beyond road traffic cases and which encompasses the concept of involuntary manslaughter. Motor manslaughter differs from any other killing in that intent is not the issue.

Clearly, there is no intent in the circumstances described by my hon. Friend or the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), but society takes the view, as does anyone who has been involved in such cases, that we can no longer accept the courts dealing with these matters so leniently. Road Peace is considering a number of issues which we will raise with the Minister. They range from road design to difficult ethical matters and savings that can accrue to the Treasury, but the suggestion that I outlined could send a powerful signal to all motorists that we need to consider our actions much more carefully.

12.43 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on securing this debate. I am glad to support everything that he said.

[Mr. Malcolm Bruce]

I was made aware of the issue because Cissie Atkinson, Livia Galli-Atkinson's grandmother, lives in my constituency and has written to me. Her letters are poignant and the hurt is very apparent, but the sense of injustice that she expresses is overwhelming. It is extraordinary that someone who, even in a fit of carelessness, does something that leads to someone else's death should not be expected to face a custodial sentence, unless there are significant mitigating factors. The presumption should be that the courts must understand that. I am advised that all those involved in the case, certainly on the prosecution side, were absolutely sure that a custodial sentence would be passed down and were correspondingly astonished when that did not happen. I am sure that the Minister will understand that the public disquiet about this has to be dealt with.

Picking up on a point made by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), we are talking about a change in our culture. Most of us drive. We know that we could be careless and that our carelessness could have consequences similar to those described today. However, if we knew that our carelessness was likely to lead to a custodial sentence, it would have a definite effect on the basic level of courtesy on our roads and on the standard of driving, which needs to be raised. People would be made to understand that causing the loss of a life is something for which there is a heavy penalty. There can be no sense of justice if the courts do not apply that principle.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): Sadly, I am sure that many of us—some would say too many of us—are aware of cases in our constituencies in which bad driving has resulted in deaths on the road. Those of us who have not been bereaved in this way can only begin to imagine the effect that it must have on the families of those who have. How the criminal law is able to contribute to our response to this terrible state of affairs is clearly a matter of great concern, and I value the opportunity to debate it this afternoon.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) for raising this subject. I undertake to reflect on what he said, and, if appropriate, I shall write to him about the points that I do not manage to cover in my response. He will appreciate that there is not a great deal of time to deal with them all now. I also thank other hon. Members for their brief but nevertheless important contributions, which arise out of the experience of their constituents or those related to their constituents, as in the case of the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce).

I was certainly very sorry to hear and read about the tragic circumstances of the death of Miss Galli-Atkinson. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate has already written to the Minister of State, Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), but I take this opportunity to pass on my condolences to the family. I understand that they must have been devastated by what happened. This is particularly close to home for me since there was a similar case, although not exactly the same set of circumstances, in my constituency some years ago. I understand that, at the end of the process, the families of those who have been killed in this way often feel somehow cheated.

There are a number of general points to make before I get into the detail of this aspect of the law. It is necessary to recognise that the question of how those who cause death on the roads are dealt with involves difficult and complex issues of charging and sentencing. At the same time, I can well understand the deep anger and frustration that relatives often feel when they have lost a loved one, especially when they believe that the person responsible has not been adequately punished.

No one can dispute the seriousness of the consequences when death is the result of a crash on the roads. There should be no doubt that the criminal law must address the extent of the offender's culpability. Of course, it is the responsibility of the Government to make available to the Crown Prosecution Service, the police and the courts offences appropriate to the degree of culpability of the driver in the circumstances in question. The difficulty in some cases is that the offender might, in law, have acted carelessly rather than intentionally, although the consequences of his act are disproportionately serious. When this happens, it is both likely and understandable that families will feel aggrieved at the outcome of the case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate asked for some statistics on manslaughter and what happens in such cases. I shall provide what statistics we have, but it would take too long to plough through them now. I certainly undertake to review them to see whether we can learn anything more by examining or collecting them differently.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): I am fully conscious of the fact that, unfortunately, I did not attend the first few minutes of the presentation of the case by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg). The distinction between careless and dangerous—a higher level of culpability—should surely be determined by the courts. One of the grossest injustices that arises in these cases surely stems from the fact that the Crown Prosecution Service and the police tend to deal out plea bargaining ahead of the hearing. As a result, the court is very frequently not allowed to distinguish between the two levels of culpability, which leads to the greatest frustration in the bereaved families.

Mr. Howarth: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. A further point along the road makes the matter even more complex. Juries were often unwilling to convict motorists for the offence of manslaughter. Cause of death offences in road traffic cases were therefore introduced in the hope that they would provide an alternative to juries. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the situation is very complex.

The current framework of law in this area is broadly based on the views of the North committee, which reported on the issue in 1988. The report addressed in great depth the concern that the law relating to road traffic accidents had not developed satisfactorily. Detailed consideration was given to the possibility of creating a new offence of causing death by careless driving. However, the report concluded that it would be wrong to impose severe penalties for unforeseen tragic consequences if the driver's actions were careless. That view has been accepted for the past 10 years by the previous Government and, for the time being, this Government. Accordingly, where driving resulting in a

death is considered to be careless, there is no causing-death offence, except where the driver was driving under the influence of drink or drugs. It is, however, an offence to cause death by dangerous driving.

We recognise the strength of opinion of many that an offence of causing death by careless driving in the absence of consumption of drink or drugs is necessary. We take those views seriously, and I assure hon. Members who have taken part in the debate that the Government will continue to consider whether such a new offence should be introduced. However, we see the strength of the arguments in the North report, and are not currently persuaded of the need to introduce such a measure. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate will be aware that my colleague in the Home Office, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, has agreed to keep the issue under review. That remains the position.

Having dealt with the offences, I turn to the question of charging. It is the role of the prosecution to decide at the beginning of the process how it is to view a case. It must look at the evidence and make the difficult decision whether there is sufficient evidence to establish that the defendant is guilty of a particular offence. The CPS, which takes the decisions, is independent of the Government, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment on or to interfere in its individual decisions on which charges to bring in a particular case. That is well understood in the House.

The Government believe that road traffic law should provide a framework for safe driving, lay down clear standards for driver behaviour and deter drivers from breaching those standards. We have no desire to be complacent about that. As part of the Government's commitment to that aim, the Transport Research Laboratory is carrying out research on behalf of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions into the way in which bad driving cases proceed through the criminal justice system. The intention is to obtain evidence on whether there is sufficiently clear guidance on the law and its purpose, and how that affects the choice of penalty. Researchers are looking in detail at the decisions taken by the police, the CPS and the courts. We expect to have results by the end of next year. At that point—hopefully—we should be in a better position to judge whether any changes in this area of the law and the way in which it operates are necessary.

I should say a little more about the vexed question of sentencing. Another of the Government's responsibilities is to ensure that the courts have the powers to decide on the appropriate sentence in each case before them. As the House would rightly expect, we take that very seriously.

As every hon. Member who has participated in this debate is aware, there is a graduated scale of penalties for road traffic offences. Careless driving carries a maximum fine of £2,500 and an obligatory endorsement of the offender's driving licence. Driving while disqualified and drink driving both carry maximum penalties of six months imprisonment, a £5,000 fine and an obligatory disqualification from driving. The maximum penalty for dangerous driving is two years imprisonment, and for causing death by dangerous driving or causing death while under the influence of drink or drugs, the maximum penalty is 10 years imprisonment. That framework rightly gives the courts the power to impose severe penalties on those who commit the most serious driving offences.

The Government are well aware that unduly lenient sentencing undermines public confidence in the criminal justice system. There are times when it seems that the courts have not made full use of the powers available to them. To help to deal with that problem, the Attorney-General has an important power to refer cases of indictable offence, such as causing death by dangerous driving, to the Court of Appeal, where it appears that the sentence was unduly lenient. The Court of Appeal has the power to increase that sentence, but it must be exercised within 28 days of the previous sentence. It is worth noting that the Court of Appeal can impose a heavier sentence only if it finds the sentence imposed unduly lenient.

We are also keen to do what we can to promote the important principle of consistency in sentencing. To this end, provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998—due to come into effect in July—will place a new statutory duty on the Court of Appeal to consider, whenever it receives an appeal against sentence, whether it should frame a new sentencing guideline or revise an existing one. The provisions set out in detail the principles that guidelines must take into account.

The provisions also establish a sentencing advisory panel, to which reference has been made, to provide advice on such guidelines to the Court of Appeal. The panel will provide the court with statistical information about sentencing, and consult a wide range of interested parties, including victims' groups, which I accept is important. It will act in three sets of circumstances: when advised by the Court of Appeal that it intends to frame a guideline, at its own instigation, and when the Home Secretary directs it to provide views to the court. We hope and believe that those provisions will lead to more comprehensive sentencing guidelines, ensuring greater consistency in sentencing. The offence of causing death by dangerous driving could be one of the offences considered in that way.

I have very listened carefully to the debate. I assure the House that I shall continue to work with colleagues in other Departments to ensure that we get it right in tackling these serious and important issues. I put it on record again that I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate and others who have taken part in the debate for drawing the Government's attention to these issues and for providing the opportunity to debate them. We take seriously the concerns and the specific case highlighted. We shall keep the matter under review and, in due course, try to find a way through the sets of concerns, which I know are real and very harrowing for the families involved. This debate has been a very useful contribution to that process.

Health Services Accreditation

12.59 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise in the Chamber the subject of the disposal of Health Services Accreditation. I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box. It probably is not the first time that he has been there since his appointment, but it is the first time that I have had the opportunity to address him there.

It saddens me that I have had to bring this issue into the Chamber today. My primary concern is that the work and knowledge of the effective development of standards in the national health service is not lost, but continues. HSA recently published its service standards for the care of elderly people, and there are continual demands from customers for new work in mental health, children's services, sexual health, housekeeping and catering—and, of course, in primary care.

HSA's system for the development of standards seems to me to be the most effective yet, because the standards are developed by users and are agreed on and implemented by users—hence they are owned by the people who use them. They are not imposed from above. Currently, some 50 health trusts throughout the United Kingdom are contracted to HSA, and more than 90 departments are in the process of implementing HSA's work.

My involvement began when I was Member of Parliament for Hastings and Rye. I am pleased to see my successor, the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster), in the Chamber, as I know that he has taken an interest in HSA. When I represented that constituency, I was invited to a presentation of certificates at the Conquest hospital in Hastings, which was one of the pilot sites. I was so impressed by what I learnt then that I visited HSA, based at Battle, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle). As a result, I agreed to introduce HSA to the wider audience of Westminster—which I did when I, with the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice), who continues to take an interest in HSA, sponsored a function in the House before the general election, attended by the then Ministers and shadow Ministers, including the Secretaries of State.

When I lost the seat at the general election, I returned to my previous day job and began to build up a lobbying business again. HSA asked me to advise it, which I was pleased to do, as I believed in its work. As soon as I was selected to stand for Beckenham, I cancelled all contracts, but my interest in HSA has continued.

I knew that HSA's future was uncertain because of the terms on which it had been handed over from the region. Indeed, the consortium of health authorities should have solved the problem of its home by March 1997, but agreed to continue funding until March 1998. I am told by Andrew Corbett-Nolan, who was HSA's director, that at a meeting with Sir Alan Langlands of the NHS Executive in autumn 1997, it was agreed that efforts should be made to retain HSA in the NHS. Shortly after that, East Sussex health authority, as the lead authority, extended the disposal time for HSA until September 1998.

In January 1998, the chief executive of East Sussex health authority, accompanied by the director of public health, told the HSA director at a meeting that, because of worries about overspending, HSA would be closed down at the end of March 1998 unless the director could make arrangements for it to be found a home elsewhere. I believe that, at that time, there was no discussion about invoking the formal disposal procedure governed by health service guidance (94)54, to which I shall refer.

The director went to the King's Fund, and it agreed to take HSA. The chief executive of East Sussex health authority welcomed that in a letter, but said that he had now to invoke the disposal procedure. I understand that there was then correspondence between the fund and East Sussex. I am told that on 5 March—at a meeting between the HSA director, the assistant director of finance of East Sussex health authority and the director of operations of the King's Fund—the assistant director of finance guided the King's Fund as to the terms of its offer.

By 27 April, East Sussex health authority had made no progress on the disposal procedure. The King's Fund offered the director of HSA the job of director of development of Health Quality Service—an organisation in association with the King's Fund—and he accepted that offer. He resigned from HSA that evening and began at the fund on 18 May.

To the outside world a possible conflict of interest now existed, as was also possible for the chairman of the advisory board of HSA, who had joined the board of Health Quality Service the previous autumn, in 1997. HQS was launched on 3 June 1998. Its mission is to

"signal to the health sector throughout the UK that we"—

HQS—

"are the premier quality assurance and quality improvement programme",

and

"to develop new standards of outcome measurement for patient satisfaction, staff motivation, clinical effectiveness, service efficiency and service access."

The situation is as follows. One organisation has now been encouraged to bid for an NHS operation. Two people closely associated with that operation—so closely associated that they knew all the operating financial details, which were presented to the advisory board of HSA at each meeting—are now involved in the bidding organisation. I accept their word that they were never involved in the bid, but, should that situation have occurred in the private sector, some searching questions would probably have been asked at that stage.

Meanwhile, on 14 May, East Sussex had invited expressions of interest in HSA by an advertisement in the *Health Service Journal*, but not in the *European Journal*. Customers were alerted, by letter, to the disposal.

At the launch of HQS on 3 June, Baroness Jay, who was then a Health Minister, Yvonne Moors—the chief nurse—and Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, better known as Philip Hunt of the National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts, all welcomed the amalgamation of HSA with HQS and hospital accreditation. Several people in the audience have separately told me of their surprise at those statements, bearing in mind the fact that we were only at the stage where bidders were being invited to talk to East Sussex health authority.

I understand that, in July, ESHA held its meeting to consider the bids that it had received. The guidance (94)54, with its annexe B by Price Waterhouse on the disposal process, recommends the establishment of a

project team. The East Sussex team consisted of the chief executive, the director of finance and the director of public health. At paragraph 9, the Price Waterhouse document recommends that

"customers should be consulted about the composition and objectives of the project team. It is also important to ensure that staff on the trading body to be disposed of are fully consulted. The precise choice of who serves on the project team should strike a balance between including those with experience of the service under review and avoiding possible conflicts of interest."

I am not aware of any consultation with customers except for the letter to customers, and I am told that there has been no consultation with staff that they would regard as meaningful. Indeed, some would go so far as to say that there has been no consultation.

When I put those two points to the chief executive of East Sussex health authority, he told me that the team had taken a deliberate decision to involve neither. The team felt that customers would leave HSA, and that the staff would leak to their ex-director—a recognition, I infer, that conflicts of interest existed.

I make no judgment, other than to say that the decision flies in the face of guidance from people expert in the disposal of companies, who were sufficiently highly regarded by the NHS to be invited to write the detailed annexe. That document says that the project team needs to develop detailed requirements for bidders, and, at paragraph 52, says that the

"findings will need to be agreed with all of the stakeholders, i.e. all those who will have the service provided for them. Care must be taken to identify all such stakeholders since there may well be 'passive' customers who are benefiting from a service at present and whose requirements will need to be included in the formal contract."

In the summer, staff were also told by East Sussex health authority that they could not mount a management buy-out.

Negotiations with potential bidders continued during summer 1998, and at the end of August the director of finance of the ESHA issued the invitation to tender, with a return date of 22 September. Paragraph 55 of the Price Waterhouse annexe says:

"Together with the service specification, the tender and contract documentation need to form the basis of a legally binding contract."

By 10 October, a very acceptable offer had been made to East Sussex health authority. I understand that the tenderer signed a confidentiality agreement to carry out due diligence, but I am told that it did not sign a legally binding contract. Staff tell me that they received no information about the winning bidder, and had to find out about the company from its website. I am not naming names because the company has now withdrawn.

However, when a company representative went to HSA to meet the staff, it was not to discuss the due diligence subjects of finance and legal obligations, but to find out about the services provided by HSA—a subject about which anyone would reasonably have thought that the company already knew, having made what should have been a legally binding offer, subject only to due diligence.

At a further meeting, a partner or client company of the official bidder also visited HSA premises. Staff report that this second team had no clear knowledge either of the organisation or the product that it was buying. Somewhat unsurprisingly, on Christmas eve the offer was withdrawn. I understand that the ESHA is now trying to resurrect the interest of the other two bidders who had submitted tenders. However, if none is forthcoming, HSA faces closure at the end of March.

I am sure that those who have taken part in the tortuous process that I have outlined have acted with the highest possible motives. I may disagree with the attitude of the East Sussex health authority towards consultation with customers and staff; that is a matter of judgment, but it seems sensible to have those two important groups on board when efforts are being made to dispose of an organisation in which they have a direct and clear interest.

I have deliberately kept my comments to a bare outline. However, while the process was continuing I raised my concerns with Ministers by parliamentary questions, both written and oral. Most recently, I wrote to the previous Minister of State. I sent copies of that letter to the head of the National Health Service Executive, Sir Alan Langlands, the National Audit Office, the Audit Commission and the chief executive of the East Sussex health authority. Other than brief acknowledgements I have received no replies.

If any hon. Member had shown the slightest interest in even the smallest frog in the NHS pool, I would have expected that to cause someone somewhere to instigate full inquiries encompassing all the players in the small drama that is the subject of the debate. My concern remains to save the work that has been done, is being done and requires to be done. We all wish there to be higher standards in the NHS.

I hope that a home can be found for the work that has been done. HSA standards fall neatly into the role of clinical excellence and the development of assurance within the NHS. The voluntary work done by so many throughout the NHS, including senior consultants from many different hospitals, the people they treat throughout the country and the staff who are involved, including porters, ambulance men, nurses, administrators and managers, should not be thrown away. I include anyone who has even in the slightest been affected by the work that has been going on and the work that has been studied. The involvement of all those concerned should not be devalued.

I urge the Minister to seek a solution that would allow everyone who uses our health service to benefit from the assurance that the work of HSA to raise standards will continue in one form or another.

1.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) on having secured the debate. I am grateful to her for her kind remarks at the beginning of her speech. I know that this is an area in which she has continued to take a great interest since she became the Member for Beckenham. I pay tribute also to my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster), who has written on several occasions on the future of Health Services Accreditation, which is located, as the hon. Lady has recognised, in his constituency.

I shall take, first, the national picture. Quality in the NHS is a subject which the Government take extremely seriously. Quality improvement is a central plank of the programme for modernising the NHS. That was set out in the White Paper "The New NHS" in December 1997. Last summer, as a follow-up to the White Paper, we published our consultation document entitled "A First Class Service: Quality in the new NHS". This document set out a three-pronged strategy to support the delivery of more

[Mr. John Denham]

consistent and higher quality care to patients. The main elements of that strategy are as follows: first, clear national standards for services and treatments through national service frameworks and a new national institute for clinical excellence; secondly, local delivery of high-quality health care through clinical governance underpinned by modernised professional self-regulation and extended lifelong learning for health professionals; thirdly, effective monitoring of progress through a new commission for health improvement, an NHS performance assessment framework and a new national survey of patient and user experience.

We shall shortly be publishing feedback on the results of that consultation exercise, but overall the reaction of the more than 600 respondents was overwhelmingly positive. It has demonstrated strong support both for our overall aim of driving up quality standards in the NHS and for the specific proposals that we have put forward to help to achieve that.

The House will be well aware that the Queen's Speech set out the Government's intention to bring forward legislation to establish the new commission for health improvement and to create a new statutory duty of quality for NHS organisations. Regulations will also be laid shortly for the establishment of the national institute for clinical excellence as a special health authority.

The Government have sent a clear signal that we are committed to putting quality of care back at the heart of the NHS, and we are putting in place a national framework to support and monitor that process. Locally, however, it must be for NHS organisations themselves to choose which of the range of quality improvement tools that are now available—including various accreditation mechanisms—they use to help them improve their services.

I shall now take up some of the points made by the hon. Member for Beckenham. The hon. Lady has recognised that I am fairly new in my present position. However, I shall ascertain whether there is outstanding correspondence from her and from my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye and endeavour to reply to it as swiftly as possible.

Before I turn to Health Services Accreditation, I shall refer to Health Quality Service, which was mentioned by the hon. Lady. It is a new organisation which was launched last year by the King's Fund. Essentially, it offers consultancy support to health service organisations on quality improvement, quality assurance and service development, building on the work of the well-established King's Fund organisational audit process.

It appears that HSA's sponsoring health authorities feel that the impression was given at the HQS launch that HQS has absorbed HSA. There may be a misconception that HQS is a formal part of the Government's NHS quality improvement strategy, perhaps arising from press reporting of the launch, and that it has been unfairly singled out for support. That is not the case. The King's Fund and HQS are independent of the Government. In the speech that my right hon. Friend Baroness Jay made at the launch of the new organisation, she was careful to emphasise that local services must be able to explore and adopt those methods and resources that best fit their needs. As was the case with the King's Fund organisational audit, NHS organisations that enter into arrangements with the new HQS will do so on their own initiative.

As the hon. Member for Beckenham has outlined, HSA is a ground-breaking organisation which was originally set up by the South East Thames regional health authority as a mechanism for maintaining and improving quality in the NHS. It operates by developing standards for particular services using multi-disciplinary working to help develop these standards and accreditation instruments to assess whether they have been achieved. In 1996, when regional health authorities were disbanded, local health authorities in the then South Thames region took over responsibility for HSA. The task of managing it fell to the East Sussex, Brighton and Hove health authority, and it has invested a considerable amount of both management effort and resources to ensure HSA's continued existence.

Over time, HSA developed an income stream by selling its accreditation process to trusts and health authorities throughout the United Kingdom, but it has needed an income guarantee to ensure that it could carry out its work effectively. That was provided by local health authorities within the South Thames region.

However, with HSA's increasingly nationwide focus, the local health authorities did not consider it appropriate to continue to fund and underwrite HSA. Accordingly, with HSA's agreement, the decision was taken for its transfer out of the public sector to another, more appropriate organisation. That has, understandably, caused concern not only to hon. Members, but to those currently working for HSA and some members of the working groups who helped to develop standards.

We recognise and understand those concerns. That is why, when it was decided that the transfer was the appropriate way forward, a firm timetable was agreed and an evaluation panel was set up to ensure that there was the utmost propriety and that all interested parties received equal treatment. That reflected the guidance set out in the health services guidelines, "NHS Trading Agencies: Future Arrangements", a copy of which is available in the Library. It was also important for the panel to ensure that the NHS maximises the value of the techniques that HSA has worked to develop over the past few years—work that was undertaken voluntarily by a considerable number of clinicians and others in the NHS.

As regards consultation, I understand that the health authority wrote to all customers and contributors on 7 May last year advising them of the planned disposal, and that there was ample opportunity to respond to the health authority expressing views about HSA's disposal.

Mrs. Lait: I have seen a copy of that letter. It informed people that HSA was up for disposal—stop and end.

Mr. Denham: I shall look into that point again, but, given the time scale that evolved, people who might have been concerned about the disposal could certainly have expressed their views on the consequences of that disposal.

In line with the timetable set for the transfer, formal proposals were received and, initially, 32 organisations asked for information packs. Five organisations subsequently expressed an interest in taking over HSA. Of those, three were shortlisted and invited to tender

through a formal tendering process. All three were assessed by the panel, which considered one to be unsuitable. In accordance with standing instructions, an offer was made to the preferred bidder of the remaining two—a consortium outside the NHS—to proceed to due diligence. Sadly, during this stage, just before Christmas, the consortium withdrew its bid.

Following that withdrawal, there seem to be four options. The preferred option is to find another appropriate organisation that will take on HSA. The East Sussex, Brighton and Hove health authority wasted no time and, as soon as possible, entered into discussion with one of the other bidders. I understand that that organisation has written to the health authority today outlining its decision on whether to proceed, and that the health authority is considering its response. That is the current position, but it is probably appropriate to review the other options that have been suggested at various times.

The second option, which I believe was proposed by the hon. Member for Beckenham, is for the Department of Health to absorb HSA into one of the two new bodies that we are creating, the national institute for clinical excellence or the commission for health improvement. I understand why the suggestion was made, but I have strong reservations about that course. Neither NICE nor the commission are intended to be accrediting bodies, and both will need to develop their own ways of working that best fit the purposes for which they were established. I am not convinced that either could comfortably absorb HSA.

The third option, which I believe was suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye, is for the Department of Health to take on the role of supporting HSA. Again, I am not convinced that that would be an appropriate course. Several other players are active in providing quality assurance and improvement services to the NHS. Indeed, it is worth noting that when the South Eastern regional health authority was abolished, a consortium of local health authorities was seen as performing that function more appropriately than the Department of Health. It is to the health authorities great credit that they continued to support HSA beyond the terms of their original commitment.

The fourth and least attractive option for everyone concerned, including those working for the organisation, is for HSA in its present form to wind up. I understand those concerns. I know that the local health authority and the NHS executive will do all that they can to find an appropriate home before that happens.

I am sorry that I cannot give more reassurances today to the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend. I can, however, reassure them on a number of points. First, the Government are committed to doing all that they can to drive and support improvements in the quality of clinical care in the NHS. To that end, we are putting in place a comprehensive national package of measures. The work carried out by HSA and other organisations in the area of quality improvement provides a range of options that the NHS can use in helping to improve and assure quality.

Secondly, we do not see a conflict between our proposals for quality improvement and the continued existence of free-standing, self-financing accreditation schemes. Indeed, the renewed focus on service quality should give NHS organisations an even stronger incentive to examine ways in which they assure themselves and their patients of the standard of services provided.

Thirdly, we believe that decisions on the use of particular quality improvement tools are, in general, best taken by services themselves, drawing on the range of products available. As I stated earlier, there was little in the response to "A First Class Service" that would lead us to alter that view.

Fourthly, the hon. Lady did not make any allegations about the process, but raised concerns about it. The NHS Executive has looked into the transfer process which, in its view, is robust, with all information being shared equally. There is little scope for undue influence or conflicts of interest to arise.

I am aware that the hon. Lady has written to the Comptroller and Auditor General expressing her concerns about the transfer process, and that those concerns are being investigated. Under the National Audit Act 1983, the National Audit Office has a responsibility to ensure that public money is spent wisely and properly. One aspect is to determine whether good value for money has been achieved when public assets are sold. I can assure the hon. Lady that both the Department and the East Sussex, Brighton and Hove health authority will provide every assistance to help the National Audit Office with any investigations.

Finally, the health authority has put in a considerable amount of both management effort and resources to ensure HSA's continued existence. The authority will happily discuss the transfer with hon. Members and will continue to do all that it can to transfer HSA out of the public sector to the best advantage of the NHS.

Social Enterprise

1.29 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry to the Front Bench and congratulate him on his promotion. I am delighted that his first duty in the House is to examine the social enterprise sector.

Social enterprises, developed by social entrepreneurs as local responses to problems of neglect, marginalisation or the withdrawal of services, have often developed in the teeth of considerable financial, logistical and institutional barriers. In our first 20 months in office, the Government have instigated a range of measures from the new deal for communities, the creation of the regional development agencies, employment zones, and the coming deregulation of credit unions, to the cross-Government action teams on exclusion. Between them, those initiatives offer an excellent opportunity to break down the barriers inhibiting social enterprise and to promote the active expansion of the sector. Nevertheless, we still need an overarching strategy to tackle the problems of lack of recognition, lack of effective support and inability to access finance that are experienced by far too many social entrepreneurs and successful social enterprises.

Development trusts, co-operatives, neighbourhood projects, credit unions and community businesses are all examples of social enterprises that provide employment and training opportunities, locally needed services or a combination of all three. They operate on a commercial basis, but, rather than seeking a narrow gain for an individual investor, their principal aim is to maximise the social profit for the community in which they are located. Successful social enterprises, therefore, have combined the hard-headed financial skills of the private sector with a strong commitment to their locality and have succeeded in giving many a much stronger stake in their community.

Despite their considerable current contributions, and their potential, we do not yet celebrate in any organised or national manner our most dynamic social entrepreneurs. Neither do we trumpet the achievements of our most successful social enterprises. There is an annual round of rewards for the enterprise or entrepreneur of the year, but there is no similar ceremony to recognise the social entrepreneur of the year, and the sector's success stories are often little known beyond their immediate participants.

The North Kensington amenities development trust, for example, uses its assets under the Westway to generate rental income from more than 90 business tenancies. That income is used to fund leisure facilities, a youth training centre and large rent subsidies for the more than 20 voluntary groups that are located on its site.

The Bromley By Bow centre, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), has grown—since a small church congregation decided to make use of its underused buildings—into a thriving community resource which now provides community care services, education activities, health projects and employment schemes. It was made possible by the local community's full involvement and leadership.

The Speke credit union was established in 1989, in its local community in Liverpool, and has grown considerably since, two years ago, it took over the building housing the area's last bank. The credit union provides basic financial services to its 1,500 members, and is now funding skills training for jobs in computers, book-keeping and marketing.

Social enterprises have increased skills, confidence and economic activity in the communities in which they operate. However, rigorous analysis and support across Government, the financial services industry and regional and local agencies are absolutely essential if the social enterprise sector is to develop and fulfil its potential for regeneration.

Social enterprises often do not sit comfortably within the boundaries of more traditional definitions. They may have charitable status, yet still operate a range of highly commercial services. They may be a limited company, under whose auspices various not-for-profit services are offered. They often have highly diverse funding streams, ranging from statutory body grant income, members' savings and lottery funding, to commercial bank loans and equity and rental income.

A lack of understanding and awareness of the potential for social enterprise remains a key problem confronting social entrepreneurs seeking finance and support for their ideas. The Conservative party's sustained attack over the past 20 years on local government has led not only to a decline in the finance available for grants and loans to the third sector but, more importantly, to the loss of much of the staffing support for new social enterprises and, hence, access to the mentoring, technical assistance and basic skills training that is required by all social entrepreneurs at one time or another.

The growth of telephone banking, the centralisation of bank lending and the consequent tide of bank branch closures has made capital and support much harder to access for social enterprises, particularly in areas of deprivation. The social enterprise sector has consistently highlighted the reluctance of many mainstream bankers to understand and fund an enterprise, even when hard-headed evidence has been provided of an initiative's profit potential. The inability to access private sector finance is a significant block on development of the social enterprise sector. The Charities Aid Foundation estimates that, in the run-up to the millennium, the sector needs more than £250 million investment over and above current grant-based income.

The problem is not only one of finance. Many training and enterprise councils do not do enough to support social entrepreneurs. One council that I spoke to, for example, has successfully provided support, technical assistance and seed-corn finance to social entrepreneurs. However, it admitted that such help is not standard and was no longer available in most of its area.

In response to the problems faced by the sector, some social entrepreneurs have attempted to develop strategic responses to the lack of finance and support. The New Economics Foundation recently highlighted the growing number of imaginative but relatively small community finance initiatives, which also offer technical assistance for social enterprises ranging from mutual guarantee schemes and reinvestment trusts to community loan funds.

The Aston reinvestment trust, for example, specialises in providing loan finance at commercial rates to small businesses and third sector projects in Birmingham that were unable to secure loans from banks. The projects that it funds are viable, but not bankable. Access, not the cost of the loan, has been the key problem.

Many of the projects were unable to secure loan finance because they lacked a track record or were unable to provide accounts over a sufficiently long period, although they were able to demonstrate their ability to repay a loan. Moreover, many of the loans that the Aston trust has made so far originated with banks bringing projects to the trust for part-financing. The consequent financial package has therefore often included a partnership between the bank and the trust—and sometimes Birmingham city council—to provide the necessary loan finance that the banks felt unable to provide on their own.

Since establishment of the council's social investment fund, in June 1997, £740,000 has been raised from individuals, companies and housing associations. A further £850,000 has been levered in from the banking sector by using the type of joint financing that I mentioned.

Successful community finance initiatives, as in the Aston example, are usually partnerships between the voluntary, private and public sectors—collaborating, for example, with banks for equity and borrowed capital or secondments, and with providers of technical assistance, such as local authority enterprise agencies or business links. They have developed considerable understanding of financing in their specific areas and provide a range of services, from commercial and micro-loans to grants, savings arrangements, assistance with training and help in developing effective business plans.

As research by the New Economics Foundation has highlighted, there is still a considerable gap between the potential of social enterprise and the capacity of current community finance initiatives to respond to it. Only five localities in the United Kingdom, for example, have dedicated local community loan funds. Recent growth in credit unions has been in workplace credit unions and not community credit unions. According to the bodies Industrial Common Ownership Movement—ICOM—and Industrial Common Ownership Finance—ICOF, the number of established co-operative development agencies, which are some of the more established support mechanisms for social enterprises, has declined from over 100 in the mid-1980s to only 30.

Research by Kingston university, which was highlighted by the New Economics Foundation, reveals that over one fifth of the loan funds that it had identified in the early 1990s as being accessible to social enterprise had closed within just 12 months. The majority of current loan funds and mutual guarantee schemes for social enterprises have been established within the past five years.

Fundamental in developing opportunities for social entrepreneurs and supporting development of social enterprises must be further changes in attitudes within the financial services industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), in a ten-minute Bill, rightly highlighted the success of America's Community Reinvestment Act—which, with related legislation, has ensured that £300 billion to £400 billion has been allocated by mainstream banks to meet community lending needs. The banks have subsequently found that considerable profits can be made in the process.

Crucial to the legislation's success has been development of effective partnerships between banks and community finance initiatives. Those involved in the initiatives have been able, because of their existing relationships with potential customers and knowledge of the local economy, to break down the barriers between banks and social enterprises.

The picture in Britain is not entirely bleak. Some parts of the financial services industry are responding to the need to provide investment funding and support for social enterprises, as the example of the Aston trust demonstrates. Unity bank, the Triodos bank and the Co-operative bank have support programmes. One of the major clearing banks, for example, has just announced a package of measures to help credit unions. Although those moves are welcome, the level of support, understanding and access to finance provided by the financial services industry has nowhere near reached its potential. Action is now needed further to stimulate private sector involvement in the social enterprise sector.

The Government, too, have to improve the access of social enterprises to basic help, training and technical aid. Fledgling pure commercial enterprises can turn to training and enterprise councils and business links and, through them, are able to access myriad training schemes and specialist support, as well as ideas for sources of finance. The remit of TECs should be specifically extended to require them to develop and support social entrepreneurs and social enterprises.

The guidance published for the regional development agencies rightly refers to the importance of community businesses and community enterprise. RDAs should be specifically required to draw up strategies to promote social enterprise, to ensure that the range of necessary technical expertise is available and to identify the needs of social enterprises in their regions.

RDAs should be supporting and stimulating the growth of community finance initiatives that are able to fund and provide the development finance for social enterprise. Indeed, RDAs should be the stimulus to partnership between community finance initiatives and the banking sector, using their resources to help to lever in private sector finance.

At macro level, Government action to stimulate social investment is crucial. One model, to which I have referred in other debates in the House, is the tax relief system for green investment funds operating in the Netherlands, which has levered almost £200 million of private finance into environmental projects since the establishment of the funds in 1995.

The funds are offered to the public by banks and are regulated through the Dutch central bank, with projects that are to be funded licensed by the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment. The interest or dividends generated by the green investment funds are exempt from income tax, which allows the bank to pass on favourable terms to the project being financed. The certificates of the first such funds, to the value of £150 million, were sold out in only nine days. Similar funding streams backed by tax relief have been developed in America and elsewhere.

Social investment funds in this country have already supported social enterprise. Without Government action to stimulate them, however, such funds will remain at comparatively low levels. The evidence from the successful, but small scale, funding initiatives taken by bodies such as ICOM, ICOF or, indeed, the Aston reinvestment trust, is that there is strong latent desire

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among the public to be able to invest their savings in social enterprises while still receiving an acceptable rate of return.

The Aston reinvestment trust is keen to begin paying interest to the investors in its social investment fund, which would ensure that they receive some return and would help to attract more investors. A system of carefully regulated tax relief on such investment funds would undoubtedly help to spur that process and lever much larger sums of private finance into the social enterprise sector.

The Government, too, should consider how else they can support access to finance for the social enterprise sector. Loan guarantees mirroring the small firms loan guarantee scheme, or the deployment of part of the RDA budgets for community loan funds, have also been highlighted as options for encouraging private sector finance to invest in social enterprise.

Social enterprises and, indeed, social entrepreneurs are powerful forces for regeneration, community empowerment and increased employment. I hope that this debate, even though it is brief, will serve further to promote these enterprises and entrepreneurs, who do not get the recognition that they deserve.

1.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Michael Wills): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on securing the debate and thank him for his kind words. He has raised an issue that is important in its own right and has set out cogently and persuasively the case for social enterprise. Social enterprise is also important because it is part of a wider agenda of promoting all forms of enterprise, which lies at the heart of Government policy.

We live in a rapidly changing world in which certainty is a luxury. Patterns of work are changing faster than ever before, and knowledge, skills and creativity, and the people who possess them, are our most valuable assets. People, and the organisations in which they operate, must change—and respond to changing circumstances—to survive and thrive.

Europe is becoming a unified market with the potential to match the United States, but only those United Kingdom businesses that are ready and willing to think and operate on a European scale will benefit. The world economy is open as never before, with larger markets offering greater opportunities, but competitors are stronger and more numerous.

New technologies offer scope for new products, and shorter product cycles make it easier for new entrants to compete with established players, but constant product refinement and development are required to keep pace with those developing technologies. Science is generating new industries faster than ever before.

Enterprise, entrepreneurship and innovation, in the broadest sense, are central to that new economy, promoting growth, increasing productivity and creating jobs—but enterprise does not happen in a vacuum; it is part of a wider social, educational and cultural environment. Enterprise cannot flourish unless it exists in a cohesive and inclusive society.

The Government are determined to build a dynamic economy driven by vigorous competition and commitment to enterprise, but we are also committed to a fairer and more inclusive society. The competitiveness White Paper, which we published at the end of last year, set out our vision of how we will encourage economic growth and regeneration at national and local level to promote wealth, widen individual options for employment and create opportunities for all.

The Chancellor's pre-Budget report and the White Paper set out the next steps in the Government's strategy for modernising the economy. The debate has highlighted how we need to build a more inclusive framework within which that new, dynamic economy can flourish. We need to ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to realise their potential—in business, as in every area of life: young and old, and men and women, of whatever ethnic origin and wherever they live.

We want business opportunities for the many, not the few. That is why the Government are working with business, banks, business support providers and a raft of other players to promote enterprise throughout this country.

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment. On his last point, and the point about financial institutions supporting social enterprise, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), one area of concern is that the financial institutions—the high street banks and building societies—have left whole areas of our inner cities. How are the Government encouraging the banks and building societies to go back and become involved with local communities, even though they are impoverished, so that they can play a partnership role with the social entrepreneurs who are the bedrock of such initiatives?

Mr. Wills: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I shall address it in a moment.

We are working with all those financial players to promote enterprise, and a number of key principles underlie our approach. We are fostering an enterprise culture that encourages innovators and risk takers; provides and maintains a supportive economic environment; identifies and removes barriers to growth; and provides business support of the highest quality to firms, at all stages of their development.

We simply cannot afford to miss any opportunity to encourage each and every form of economic activity. We cannot afford the human and economic waste of individuals being denied the opportunity to realise their potential. We must not tolerate the persistence of poverty, unemployment and despair anywhere in this country.

As my hon. Friends have suggested, that requires the wholehearted commitment of many players, not least the new regional development agencies. They have a crucial role to play in taking forward measures to raise regional skills, to encourage links between business and education, to review the coherence and quality of business support provided through the business links and TECs in their areas and, in so doing, to strengthen their communities.

The Government are also considering new measures to support the growth of smaller businesses in areas of particular need—for example, coalfield communities,

coastal towns and countryside areas, which are suffering steep decline in traditional employment, and cities and towns with severe joblessness. Those measures will complement action to combat social exclusion and will link with other Government programmes to combat deprivation, such as the employment zones, health action zones, the new deal for communities, the single regeneration budget and the new coalfields enterprise fund. That is what joined-up government is all about. I should also mention the initiative launched last year by the Prime Minister to establish a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. To take that forward, the Government have set up a number of policy action teams. These teams of experts, each with a champion Minister, are working together to solve some of the most intractable problems faced by deprived neighbourhoods.

The teams consist of representatives from the communities themselves, and from business, local and national government and the voluntary sector. They are consulting widely as part of their work. The teams will report by December, so that their work can inform and shape the national policy for neighbourhood renewal, which will be put in place early next year.

The Department of Trade and Industry has a team looking at access to information and communication technologies. It is vital that people living in those neighbourhoods can connect to the real opportunities and activities now being offered by the information revolution. We cannot have a nation divided between information "haves" and "have nots".

Last November, the Economic Secretary announced a package of measures to help to expand the credit union movement. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West suggested, credit unions do invaluable work in providing some of the poorer members of our society with savings facilities, low-cost credit, which has traditionally been a problem for them, and financial education. That gives people most in need the opportunity to build up a good credit record, which would otherwise be denied them. The proposed measures, on which the Government are currently consulting, include allowing credit unions to offer interest-bearing share accounts, making the common bond requirement more flexible to allow more people to join, increasing flexibility in relation to accounts for young people, extending repayment periods for loans, and removing the current 5,000 maximum membership limit.

Those measures, along with proposals for the future regulation of the credit union sector under the Financial Services Authority, will allow the sector freedom to develop, but, at the same time, ensure that adequate protection is in place for savers. A further important initiative is that the banks and credit unions task force is exploring how banks and building societies can work more closely with credit unions to increase their effectiveness.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report entitled "Small is bankable: Community reinvestment in the UK", which was published last year, found that, although there is a wide variety of community finance initiatives, they do not fully fill the financing gap between the demand for small enterprise finance in deprived areas and the supply from commercial lenders. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West has given the House further evidence of that in relation to the social enterprise sector.

There are already examples of good practice. For example, credit unions are beginning to take hold, and we shall do what we can to encourage them. Some of the high street banks are already doing excellent work. There are community loan funds, several of which have now formed a UK association—the Rebuilding Society Network; micro-finance funds, the largest of which, the Prince's youth business trust, has assets of £21 million; mutual guarantee societies; and social banks, of which Triodos bank has some £52 million assets in the UK.

The challenge now for the Government is to explore how best to extend nationwide the best practice of the most successful local community finance initiatives, while enabling local partnerships to devise the most appropriate forms of financial support for all the enterprises operating in their areas.

Crucial as they are, it is not just financial issues that matter; it is also the attitude and good will of all the players at the local level. That lies behind many of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West made. We need to create a sympathetic culture, and I have referred already to the pivotal role that the regional development agencies will play in that respect.

My hon. Friend mentioned the role of the training and enterprise councils and said that he wanted them to do more. I commend the report produced recently by the TEC national council equal opportunities advisory committee on how the TECs and the chambers of commerce are tackling social exclusion. Equality and social exclusion are integral to the work of all TEC national council policy committees, which are charged with

"seeking proactively to ensure that funding mechanisms, entitlement policies and associated regulatory and support regimes enable all individuals to participate to the full extent that they are able".

The Government's approach is holistic. It is based on a fundamental commitment to a fair and just society for everyone by stimulating enterprise, creating employment, encouraging everyone to maximise his or her potential and protecting those in greatest need. The Government recognise that it is not for us to do that on our own. We can do it only with, and in support of, effort by others. That is why last year the Prime Minister initiated the Giving Age project, which is now being taken forward by the Home Office. It aims to rebuild a sense of community throughout the UK by encouraging and supporting all forms of community involvement.

Another project, UK Cares, is led by Business in the Community with support from the Government as well as from some of our best-known companies. It aims to modernise the concept of employee volunteering to enable many more businesses and employees to contribute to the communities in which they live and work.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about the social economy—the so-called third sector—and he was right to do so. Social enterprise has particular qualities, aims and values that place human achievement and enrichment at the forefront of all its activities. We have only to remember the Rochdale pioneers and their selfless work, which started in the local community but extended far beyond their own dreams to influence today's society. I hope that I have reassured my hon. Friend that, both directly and indirectly, the Government share the values

[Mr. Wills]

implicit, and explicit, in what he has expressed today and recognise the need to support them through practical actions.

I am convinced that one way in which the Government can help is by ensuring that all those who are involved in running social enterprises are helped to become more professional and better equipped with the skills, knowledge and acumen that create profitable businesses and successful organisations. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure that the wealth of advice and support that is available is extended to the third sector. Obviously, it is the responsibility of the sector itself to take advantage of what is available, to make demands on business links and training and enterprise councils, and on all who provide enterprise support in the UK. If that support is sought and help is not forthcoming, I should like to know about it. I hope that my hon. Friends will inform me about it so that I can sort it out.

The Department of Trade and Industry is committed to continuing to work closely with other Whitehall Departments to ensure that the social economy has its rightful place on the Government's agenda. In my role as Minister responsible for small businesses, I shall do whatever I can to promote this very worthwhile aspect of the enterprise spectrum. Furthermore, I undertake to report again to my hon. Friend by Easter on the progress that I have been able to make on these issues.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Links

1. **Mr. David Watts** (St. Helens, North): What steps she is taking to promote trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. [64854]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): The Industrial Development Board and the Local Enterprise Development Unit organise and support company participation in trade exhibitions in Great Britain, meet-the-buyer events and other trade initiatives. The IDB, LEDU and the Northern Ireland growth challenge have been developing links between Northern Ireland suppliers and major Great Britain purchasers.

Mr. Watts: Does the Minister agree with me that such trading links help the peace process in Northern Ireland? Is he aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) is leading a campaign to improve trade links between the north-west and Northern Ireland? Will his Department provide all possible help to ensure that those initiatives are successful?

Mr. Ingram: Obviously, I agree that any improvement in the economic landscape of Northern Ireland helps the peace process. My hon. Friend is also right about the development of links. As the new regional development agencies evolve in England, they will seek new trading partnerships, and Northern Ireland is an area in which they could enhance those relationships. Many opportunities exist, and undoubtedly Northern Ireland will look for increased trade with the north-west of England, and the north-west will seek increased trade with Northern Ireland.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): The Minister will, I am sure, agree that the trading links between Northern Ireland and Great Britain are essential to the prosperity of our economy. Does he agree with me that the new British-Irish Council provides an ideal forum within which those trading links can be explored and developed, and that, for the future of Northern Ireland, the natural framework for trade is the British Isles as a whole? The British-Irish Council provides an opportunity to develop those links.

Mr. Ingram: The answer is yes. There will also be many other opportunities, as hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) highlighted. We must look for every opportunity to improve trading links. I imagine that the new Assembly and the new Minister who will be appointed to deal with the development of the economy will take a progressive approach to this matter.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Will my right hon. Friend report on the progress of the electricity interconnector between Scotland and Northern Ireland, which will enable people throughout the island of Ireland to take advantage of competitively priced electricity generated in my constituency? Does he agree that the best possible way of promoting trade and prosperity in and around Northern Ireland must be the continuing success of the peace process?

Mr. Ingram: My hon. Friend refers to the energy network, which is one of the important links between Great Britain and Northern Ireland—indeed, the whole island of Ireland. We were pleased that the two private companies, Northern Ireland Electricity and Scottish Power, came to an agreement on the interconnector. I am sure that, in the years ahead, it will improve the overall energy base in Northern Ireland. We are also trying to attract gas companies into the economy. More competition will eventually drive down prices.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Does the Minister agree that the extremely valuable trade links would be improved if the wholly unacceptable policy of releasing terrorists—

Madam Speaker: Order. There are questions on that issue further down the Order Paper. This question is about trade links. Many Members want to put a question on this issue, so will the hon. Member confine his remarks to trade and wait until later to refer to decommissioning? I know what he is on about.

Mr. Soames: I will, indeed.

Does the Minister agree that the restoration of peace under proper circumstances is extremely important to the trading position and the links between Northern Ireland and the mainland? Will he assure me that he will bear in mind the fact that it is necessary to have a proper, orderly security situation in Ulster?

Mr. Ingram: The answer is yes. We need both: peace and prosperity are inextricably linked. That is why the Good Friday agreement provides a framework for the creation of a peaceful environment in which new economic development can take place. That requires the two Governments and all parties to the agreement to honour the commitments in the agreement.

Operational Responsibilities

2. **Mr. Ken Maginnis** (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): If she will make a statement on the definition of operational matters as it applies to the responsibilities of the Chief Constable and of the General Officer Commanding. [64855]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Under statutory arrangements for the tripartite governance of policing, the Chief Constable has responsibility for the "direction and control" of the police force. The Government fully recognise the importance of the operational independence of the police.

The armed forces in Northern Ireland provide military aid for the civil powers in support of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. As such, all operational military activity is provided to support the RUC.

Mr. Maginnis: In so far as that is the case, will the Minister reassure me that decisions made by the Chief

Constable for operational reasons and supported by the GOC are not exploited unwisely by the Northern Ireland Office for political reasons? Will he reassure me that explanations for action by the Chief Constable for strictly operational reasons need not be made public solely to placate Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and other members of Sinn Fein-IRA? Will the Minister also reassure me that neither he nor the Secretary of State will give assurances about where police stations will or will not be rebuilt after their destruction by IRA activity?

Most of us accept the need for community policing. Any refusal to restore police stations in towns such as Ballygawley would be deeply resented.

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman has asked a number of questions. Let me deal with what I consider to be the main thrust of his inquiries.

The Chief Constable, and the GOC who supports him, constitute between them one of the main providers of security advice for the Secretary of State. They operate—this is certainly true of the Chief Constable—entirely in relation to the entitlement to operational independence that I defined in my answer. There is a good working relationship: there is a good partnership between all involved in the delivery of security in Northern Ireland. That will continue.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Ballygawley RUC station. Having visited Ballygawley last autumn, I understand the point that he is making; but the Chief Constable must decide on his priorities in terms of the building or rebuilding of stations. He has submitted his proposals on a prioritised basis, and the Secretary of State has accepted them. To that extent, his view has prevailed.

Irish Language

3. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If she will make a statement on developments in promoting the Irish language. [64856]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. John McFall): In June last year, the Government announced their intention to sign the Council of Europe charter for regional or minority languages, and to specify Irish for the purposes of part III of the charter at an early date. In July, the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 was enacted, placing a statutory duty on the Department of Education in Northern Ireland to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education. A new branch within the Northern Ireland civil service is being established to develop policy on linguistic diversity, including the Irish language. The agreement of 18 December 1998 determined that there should be a cross-border implementation body with responsibility for promoting the Irish language.

Mr. Dismore: Will my hon. Friend tell us what progress has been made with the cross-border language implementation body? Will he confirm that he is considering not just the Irish but the Ulster-Scots? Perhaps he can also tell us whether Irish will be permitted to be used in the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr. McFall: In answer to the question about the cross-border body, I can say that the 18 December statement from the office of the First and Deputy First Ministers announced agreement on matters for north-south co-operation and implementation by Departments. Among the six implementation bodies is one dealing with language. It will have a number of functions, including promoting the Irish language and facilitating and encouraging its use. As for the Ulster-Scots, £108,000 has been spent on a study.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Can the Minister say how much all that will cost the British taxpayer?

Mr. McFall: What I can say is that it is money well spent. If the hon. Gentleman had been in Northern Ireland when the comprehensive spending review was announced, he would have noted that there were bumper solutions for education and health. Following many years of not receiving the help that they should have received for special problems, the people of Northern Ireland, like the Government, are celebrating.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I am sure that Labour Members recognise the commitment to encouraging the Irish language in Northern Ireland. May I ask the Minister to pass on our thanks to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, who also recognises the Irish language, it being part of the curriculum on this side of the pond?

Does the Minister remember the reply to a question that I raised on 28 October about promotion of the Irish language in Derry, which referred to a grant of £120,000 to Meanscoil Dhoire, the Irish language school in Derry? Is he aware that only £60,000 of the grant has been made available to the school and that there are serious difficulties in promoting the Irish language in the city? Will he undertake to investigate, so that we truly promote the Irish language throughout the Province?

Mr. McFall: I thank my hon. Friend for her positive comments on the Government's measures to assist Irish-medium education. She will know—it is of great interest to her—that 200 places have been funded in Irish-medium pre-school settings from September 1998 under a pre-school expansion programme.

My hon. Friend mentions Meanscoil Dhoire, the independent Irish-medium school in Derry. Unfortunately, it does not meet current viability thresholds, so cannot be grant-aided. However, negotiations are taking place—I have been involved in them personally—to establish the school as a grant-aided Irish-medium unit at a neighbouring school. In the meantime, as she says, it receives recurrent funding of £120,000 from the European Union peace package, but I will look into the specific point that she mentions about funding not being fully spent.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the Minister agree that the promotion of Irish language study in Northern Ireland would be easier if it were not for the perception that the Irish language has been hijacked by extreme republican elements in Northern Ireland? Does he also agree that expertise and qualifications in subject areas that are sought by employers help to promote those subject areas? Where will young people with a qualification in Irish language have career prospects in Northern Ireland?

Should not every effort be made to raise the standard of skill and qualification in the use of English language? Should that not be promoted above the Irish language and, indeed, Ulster-Scots?

Mr. McFall: Those are not exclusive. The Belfast agreement points not only to the Irish language, but to Ulster-Scots. Activities in relation to that have amounted to expenditure by the Government of £108,000. Only last week, I was in training centres and further education establishments in Springfield road and off Shankill road, where I took great delight in talking to people from a traditionally loyalist area, who told me that they were taking part in courses in Irish history. They had a proud tradition. They wanted to celebrate that proud tradition and, in doing so, they were emphasising the importance of two cultures getting along.

Collaborative Disabled Sports Projects

4. **Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe** (Bradford, South): What progress has been made in furthering collaborative disabled sports projects between young people from both communities. [64858]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. John McFall): Work with disabled people, primarily young people, is a priority for the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, which has trebled investment in that key target group over the past three years. That work crosses community boundaries.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I thank the Minister for that answer. Those events are well supported by all sections of the community. Anything that brings people together has to be welcomed; unfortunately, the charitable and voluntary sectors are now funding many of those events and there is a danger that some of them will not take place. Notwithstanding what the Minister has said about the Sports Council, will he ensure that local authorities and others try to keep those events going?

Mr. McFall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He makes an important point. In Northern Ireland, the role of voluntary organisations is extremely important, particularly in relation to disabled sports. I have been encouraging the Sports Council for Northern Ireland to look at that matter. I think that he will welcome the points that I make.

Over past years, the council has increased its investment in sport for people with disabilities; that has included both financial support and technical guidance. In 1998, the council established and provided for an independent federation of organisations with an interest in disability sports known as Disability Sports (Northern Ireland). Therefore, the voluntary sector is being attended to. It is important that we encourage developments in those areas, particularly among the youth and across communities.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Does the Minister agree that the divisions were not between the communities in so far as most of those with disabilities were going to the same schools, but were the result of separate sports provision for the blind, the deaf, paraplegics and those with learning disabilities? Will the Minister accept the welcome that has been given to the new body which is bringing together representatives of those sports, of local authorities and of those with physical education specialities?

Mr. McFall: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about cross-community sport. I mentioned previously a number of areas to which the Sports Council has been channelling resources and where facilities are available. Those include Northern Ireland Blind Sports, the Northern Ireland Paraplegic Association, the Ulster Deaf Sports Council and the Northern Ireland branch of the United Kingdom Sports Association for People with Learning Difficulties. But they will work towards and enhance provision only if it is cross-community, and everyone, irrespective of religion, race and gender is accommodated. That is an important point which I have discussed with representatives of the Sports Council and which I will ensure is emphasised.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Minister satisfied that collaborative sports projects for disabled young people from both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland currently receive a proportionate share of national lottery proceeds?

Mr. McFall: If the hon. Gentleman knows Northern Ireland, he will know that the voluntary organisations comprise a large and important part of it. We have been encouraging such groups to apply for national lottery funds and for facilities through the new opportunities fund. More can be done in that regard. As the hon. Gentleman knows, many of those groups sometimes do not have access to the correct information. It is important that that is disseminated to them and that they have the expertise to fill in the forms. It is important that their awareness is heightened. I fully support the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's question and I shall promote his view.

Decommissioning

5. **Mr. Tony Baldry** (Banbury): If she will make a statement on the decommissioning of terrorist weapons in Northern Ireland. [64859]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): I welcome the positive act of the Loyalist Volunteer Force decommissioning which took place on 18 December. While discussions continue between representatives of other groups and the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, it is now time for them to start decommissioning also. The agreement must be implemented in full and decommissioning is an indispensable part of it.

Mr. Baldry: I do not think that any hon. Member would disagree with the Secretary of State's answer, but it is a fundamental part of good faith in the whole process that there should be decommissioning, and if people cannot have trust in the decommissioning process, how can they have trust in any other part of the process?

Marjorie Mowlam: I agree that decommissioning is an essential part of the agreement and trust on all sides is necessary for it to move forward. We need to see progress on all aspects of the Good Friday agreement.

Decommissioning is an essential part of that agreement and should happen. It is not a precondition; it is an obligation.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): I am sure that the Secretary of State and the whole House will join me in condemning the cowardly bomb attack by the Orange volunteers on the house of Patrick Shields last night, not far from where I live in my constituency. It is particularly poignant in that Loughinisland, a small rural community, has already been visited by the loyalist paramilitaries, when six of its people were machine-gunned to death on a summer's night. Does the Secretary of State agree that the best way to resolve the problem of decommissioning and violence is to establish a strong, cross-community government of the people? Will she call on all the elected representatives of Northern Ireland, of whatever party or attitude, to work together to ensure that the will of the people, expressed through referendums and in actions, is immediately implemented?

Marjorie Mowlam: I share the hon. Gentleman's condemnation of last night's barbaric behaviour. I condemn any group from either side of the community that indulges in such behaviour. The security forces are doing all that they can to stop such people. I hope that those who have information will go to the security forces. I know that sometimes that is difficult because of threats, but that is the way to stop such behaviour. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, we shall achieve that if we implement the Good Friday agreement and show people that there is an alternative to the violence of the past if communities work together to build for the future.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): The Secretary of State will be aware that, only last week, Martin McGuinness alleged that, during the talks process, Sinn Fein made it clear to the Prime Minister and the Irish Prime Minister that it could not deliver IRA decommissioning or disarmament. Is that allegation correct?

Marjorie Mowlam: I think that the hon. Gentleman will accept that what is important is that decommissioning happens. Many words have been spoken in the past year by people on all sides in Northern Ireland. It is important that progress should be made, with parties talking together to build for the future. Decommissioning is essential. Regardless of what parties have said in the past, efforts should be made to implement the Good Friday agreement in full.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are totally committed to achieving decommissioning through the peace process, particularly in view of the risk of armaments falling into the hands of terrorist groups—republican or loyalist—that continue to oppose the agreement violently?

Marjorie Mowlam: I agree with my hon. Friend. We are doing all that we can to encourage decommissioning, but, as the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) said, progress will be made by implementing all parts of the Good Friday agreement. Decommissioning is an essential part of it. If the weapons are collected sooner rather than later, it will be tougher for the small number of groups that are out to destroy the peace process to find arms to facilitate that.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): We have often heard politicians associated with terrorist organisations promising that they are doing their best to secure decommissioning. What does "doing their best" mean? Does the Secretary of State have any way of measuring what they are doing to turn their fine words into results?

Marjorie Mowlam: The best way to determine whether the words of effort are serious is to look at the work being done by the parties with the decommissioning body—the meetings that are held and the discussions that are had. In addition, whenever I meet the parties involved with paramilitary weapons and decommissioning, I encourage, nag and cajole them to ensure that they are seriously doing all that they can. There is no true substitute for decommissioning, which we all want.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is not the role of the British Government to attempt to rewrite the Good Friday agreement, which was endorsed overwhelmingly by the people of the island of Ireland? To make decommissioning a precondition would amount to rewriting the Belfast agreement.

Marjorie Mowlam: It is important to ensure that the Good Friday agreement is implemented in full, to the letter. We are trying to do that, in conjunction with the Irish Government where relevant. We hear a lot of uncertainty and negative statements. Sometimes a little more positive confidence from both sides of the House would help the process no end.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Does the Secretary of State agree that no institution of government claiming to be democratic could conceivably include representatives of a party said by the Secretary of State to be inextricably linked with armed terrorists? Is she aware that the Chief Constable has said that two parties in the Assembly—Sinn Fein and the Progressive Unionist party—represent terrorist groups? Those terrorist groups are currently committing breaches of the ceasefire by mutilating and murdering citizens on both sides of the community in Northern Ireland.

Marjorie Mowlam: The hon. and learned Gentleman and I disagree on the interpretation of the Chief Constable's words. I read the Chief Constable's words as meaning that there are paramilitary groups on all sides, in a generic sense, involved in punishment beatings, but that he lacks the evidence that is needed in a court of law. Rumour cannot hold in a court of law, and we have to follow the rule of law. Unless we have the evidence, it is impossible to act. I shall keep the situation under review, but I assure the hon. and learned Gentleman that the Chief Constable's words were generic and that he said clearly that, in his opinion, all groups were still on ceasefire.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): In his new year message to the people of Northern Ireland, the Prime Minister said that there was a clear obligation on decommissioning. Given the 10 March deadline for the

handover of powers to the new Assembly, will the Secretary of State assure the House that, if there is no decommissioning by that date, she will not impose an Executive structure and ministerial posts on the Assembly?

Marjorie Mowlam: I think that that contribution illustrates what I said about how it would be more helpful if sometimes a more confident and positive approach, rather than a negative one, were taken. We aim to have everything in place by 10 March, especially if the Assembly approves the reports given to it by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on 15 February; it is clear that we need to get that through first. The hon. Gentleman will know that it does not help to prejudge decisions, so let us get the Assembly's decision on those reports before looking at what happens next. It is obvious that acting without support across the community and across the parties would mean that decisions taken would not work.

Peace Process

6. **Mr. Jim Murphy** (Eastwood): If she will make a statement on the peace process in Northern Ireland. [64860]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): I welcome the agreement reached before Christmas, which was supported this week in the Assembly, on the number and functions of ministerial offices and on areas for north-south co-operation. It is hoped that it will be approved by the Assembly on 15 February, but, before that happens, a lot of detailed work has to be done in consultation with the parties in the Assembly. However, I believe that it should be possible to complete that legislative programme in preparation for devolution in the middle of March.

Mr. Murphy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Will she tell the House what impact the Assembly's decision on departmental issues will have on the establishment of shadow institutions, in particular, the introduction of the shadow Executive? Hon. Members on both sides of the House know that the shadow Executive are needed if the people of Northern Ireland are to be able to get to work building the hospitals and schools that are essential to their communities.

Marjorie Mowlam: The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are due to make their final report to the Assembly on 15 February. The party leaders will then have to decide whom to appoint for their parties, and to which posts on the shadow Executive they should be appointed. The appointments will be made at a subsequent meeting of the Assembly, which I would expect to take place early in March, if we are to be ready to transfer powers by mid-March.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Does the Secretary of State accept that, in recent weeks, there has been a nauseating increase in punishment beatings, mutilations, intimidation and the number of ordinary decent people being driven from their homes? Is that not in total breach of the Good Friday agreement? She and I know full well that the paramilitaries involved in those beatings also signed up to the Good Friday agreement and were supposed to have renounced violence in all its forms.

Marjorie Mowlam: I join the right hon. Gentleman in condemning outright punishment beatings across the board. They are barbaric acts. However, we must act on the evidence not rumours. If we do not, there is a chance that the courts will not be able to deliver the kind of detail that the prosecution cases will need. Of course we condemn the punishment beatings, but I warn Opposition Members to be careful in saying that they will name people, because that could be contrary to what the families and the Royal Ulster Constabulary want.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [64884] **Gillian Merron** (Lincoln): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 20 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Gillian Merron: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, despite being some 90 years late, today's announcement to scrap hereditary peers makes it a great day for democracy? Can my right hon. Friend assure me that, in getting rid of that out-of-date privilege, we shall see more up-to-date progress on health, education and jobs—the things that matter most to the people whom we represent?

The Prime Minister: Yes. We shall see progress on all the things that will help to modernise this country and make it a more just and fair society. The Government are in favour of the minimum wage, the working families tax credit, Bank of England independence and £40 billion more for health and education. The Opposition are in favour of hereditary peers. That is the difference between the two parties.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): The Prime Minister may have seen the latest and mounting reports in this morning's newspapers—the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay), raised the matter during Northern Ireland questions—of terrorist beatings in Northern Ireland. This morning's reports concern Andrew Peden, who was tortured for 10 hours and left to die, and who lost both his legs. His wife says that he cries out every night as he relives the experience. Beatings such as that are happening in increasing numbers, yet we are still releasing early prisoners belonging to the organisations responsible for those crimes. Does the Prime Minister agree that the beatings are a breach of the Good Friday agreement?

The Prime Minister: Any punishment beatings at all are a breach of the agreements that have been entered into. This has always been a very difficult issue with which

the previous Government grappled during the first IRA ceasefire. Indeed, they continued their early release scheme for prisoners although punishment attacks were occurring at that time. However, I agree that such attacks are totally unacceptable and we are doing everything that we possibly can to bring them to an end.

Mr. Hague: We agree with the Prime Minister about trying to bring punishment beatings to an end. However, he must know that it is not right to compare release schemes under the previous Government with the release scheme that is now in progress. The then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland made it clear that those who had committed the most heinous crimes would not be released until the end of the first decade of the next century, and that remission did not apply to people who had been sentenced to life imprisonment. The cases are not comparable.

I remind the Prime Minister that, on 6 May last year, he said:

"It is essential that organisations that want to benefit from the early release of prisoners should give up violence."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

The Prime Minister pledged to the people of Northern Ireland that terrorists would have to bring an end to bombings, killings and beatings; begin the progressive dismantling of paramilitary structures; and co-operate fully with the commission on decommissioning. Given that none of those things is happening yet—although we want them to—is it not time to stop the early release of terrorist prisoners?

The Prime Minister: We must judge this issue against all the evidence, including the security advice that we receive and the question whether we believe that the ceasefires have broken down. We do not believe that it is justified to conclude that. In saying that, I do not minimise our anxiety about the level of punishment beatings. We make very important judgments the whole time, and I believe that at present, on balance, we are making the right judgment. However, I do not minimise the difficulty involved.

Mr. Hague: Of course, the Prime Minister is right to say that we have to consider all the evidence. The Chief Constable of Northern Ireland said on Friday that

"there is no doubt whatever that all of these organisations, including those who purport to be in cessations of military operations, are engaged in this repugnant activity."

The parents of RUC Constable David Sterrit, who know that I am raising their case today, have been told the dates on which their son's killers will be freed, and one of them—in an act of grotesque insensitivity by the Northern Ireland Office—will be released on the 10th anniversary of his murder.

Plans are being made months ahead for the early release of terrorists, seemingly without regard to whether any guns or bombs will be turned in. Is it not time that we put on hold the release of convicted terrorists, when they have not yet given up a single gun or bomb?

The Prime Minister: In the Sterrit case, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to the family explaining the circumstances.

It is true that the Chief Constable made the remarks that the right hon. Gentleman ascribed to him. However, he also said that he believed that the ceasefires were intact. We have to make a judgment. The right hon. Gentleman is, in effect, asking us to bring the whole Good Friday agreement to an end. He has to think through the consequences of what he is saying. We continue to make our judgment in very difficult circumstances.

Incidentally, it is not correct that the previous Government's early release scheme did not include very serious crimes.

We believe, on balance, that our judgment is correct. The consequence of taking the course that the right hon. Gentleman is advocating would be more serious than he is saying.

Mr. Hague: Far from trying to damage the Good Friday agreement, we are calling for the agreement to be implemented. The Prime Minister has said, and the Northern Ireland Secretary rightly said in Question Time moments ago, that the Government are determined to implement the whole agreement. However, more than half the terrorists have now been released, the beatings, torturing and shootings go on and the storing of weapons continues.

Is it not true that every time a prisoner is released without weapons being handed in or beatings stopping, the Government are throwing away a valuable negotiating card in implementing the full agreement? We are getting nearer to the day when all the terrorists will have been released and what they were meant to do in return will not have been done. Although it is a matter of judgment, is not the right judgment now that a change of policy would be in the interests of lasting peace?

The Prime Minister: No, obviously I do not believe that to be the case. As I said, I understand why the right hon. Gentleman raises the issues in the way that he does. I emphasise that the prisoners are released on licence. There is not an amnesty. Indeed, the vast majority of those who are released would be released early in any event under schemes agreed by earlier Administrations.

Judgments on Northern Ireland are always difficult. The right hon. Gentleman will remember when it was revealed that the previous Government had been involved in secret negotiations with Sinn Fein, despite their denials. After the first IRA ceasefire, we continued to support the previous Government when they asked the IRA to declare the ceasefire permanent—if the right hon. Gentleman remembers, that was their demand—and when they subsequently dropped that demand. We followed them when they used the Washington 3 precondition of decommissioning before entry to talks and then effectively abandoned it. We did not demur when the Government suddenly decided in 1996 to declare that there had to be elections before all-party talks.

My point is not to criticise the previous Government. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] It is not. It is simply to explain the difficulties of dealing with this situation. The situation is never perfect, but in 18 months we have come further than people believed that we could. That has been with all the difficulties—tactical, strategic and difficulties of principle—inherent in this situation. I repeat, we keep it under constant review, but if the right hon. Gentleman believes that were we to stop everything now it would

increase the chance of the Good Friday agreement being implemented, I have to say that my judgment is that that is wrong.

Mr. Hague: I return briefly to one remaining point on this. The Prime Minister points to a bipartisan policy in the last Parliament. Of course, it is true that the Labour Opposition often supported the Conservative Government at the time. It is also true that they voted against the anti-terrorist legislation of the Conservative Government, so let us be clear that bipartisanship on this is important, but it is not a blank cheque. Equally, this Opposition have supported and will continue to support the Government on the Good Friday agreement. The Prime Minister knows that we have given a great deal of support to the Government behind the scenes and will always do so whenever we are asked, but we make a different judgment on this particular question. I ask him to recognise that, for many people in this country, it is very difficult to understand how we can go along with the early release of terrorist prisoners when other things that were meant to happen at the same time are not being done.

The Prime Minister: I do not dispute in the least the right hon. Gentleman's entitlement to depart from us on issues of judgment. What I am trying to do is explain the reason why I have come to the judgment that I have. The reason that I mentioned the other aspects that happened when a previous Government were in office was simply to indicate that there are difficulties in this process, which will come with whatever Government are trying to deal with it.

The right hon. Gentleman says that nothing else is really being progressed in the Good Friday agreement at the moment. I do not think that that is true. I think that an awful lot has happened. We have got to the stage where we have the principle of consent now accepted in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, where everyone now supports the idea of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly and where, if we can get the last bits of the agreement fulfilled, there can be a place for all parties to be part of the new Northern Ireland Executive. Even with the punishment beatings which, yes, I agree, are wholly unacceptable, we have ceasefires in effect. Even with all of that, I think that the process in the end yields benefits for people in Northern Ireland. [HON. MEMBERS: "Disgraceful."] I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues who are shouting "disgraceful" behind him that they can disagree with the judgment I am making, but I hope at least that they recognise that we are trying to make the judgment in good faith on the basis of what is in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. I do not dispute his right to disagree with that judgment; all I am trying to do as Prime Minister is explain why I think the judgment that I have made is still correct.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the threatened closure of the Wrangler jeans factory at Camelon in my constituency with the possible loss of about 500 jobs, which would be a devastating blow for the workers and their families and, indeed, for the whole of the local economy? Will my right hon. Friend arrange for urgent discussions with ministerial colleagues and representatives of the company and work force to see what can be done to try to save as many jobs as possible, and deal with the crisis facing the entire clothing and textile industry, which is due mainly to high interest rates and the high value of sterling?

The Prime Minister: On my hon. Friend's last point, interest rates have now come down significantly, and the value of the pound is virtually back down to the level inherited at the time of the general election. However, on the specific prospective closure of the Wrangler jeans factory, I am certainly happy to make sure that representations are made to Ministers, and I am sure that my hon. Friend can be part of those representations. If there is any way that I can facilitate that, I will.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Will the Prime Minister confirm that, following the atrocities at Racak in Kosovo and President Milosevic's unacceptable demands for the expulsion of the head of the Kosovo verification mission, if diplomatic means cannot persuade President Milosevic to return to compliance with the terms of the ceasefire, NATO stands ready in swift order to use military force to compel him to do so?

The Prime Minister: As we have said before, events in Racak were wholly unacceptable; it was a humanitarian outrage. Those responsible should be brought to justice speedily. The attempt by Milosevic to expel the head of the Kosovo verification mission is equally unacceptable. Unless Milosevic fully complies with what he agreed in October, and with the demands of the international community, he risks a rapid military response from NATO. NATO agreed this morning to shorten the notice to move its aircraft from 96 to 48 hours. We must move with the rest of our allies—obviously—but we certainly remain ready to act.

Mr. Ashdown: I am grateful to the Prime Minister for that response. Will he confirm that, although military action must of course have a clear political objective, nevertheless, in the final analysis, the international community could not stand idly by and watch Kosovo descend into a bloody civil war if President Milosevic attempts a final solution? Therefore, if all other means have failed, we may ultimately have to consider a NATO ground force in Kosovo.

The Prime Minister: I certainly share the view that, whatever the difficulties, the international community cannot walk away from Kosovo. We are ready to take whatever action is necessary. Indeed, without the credible threat of force, I do not believe that diplomacy will ever be sufficient. The United Kingdom will chair a contact group meeting in London on Friday. Before the question of further action is addressed, we must however be aware of two things.

First, we must act in concert with others and with our allies. Secondly, we must have clear political objectives in any action that we take. That does not simply involve negotiation with the Serbian side and with Milosevic. Full participation of the Kosovar side, including the Kosovo Liberation Army, which at the moment is refusing to participate in proper talks, is also necessary. It is important that both those are in place. If they are, we would certainly not rule out the possibility of participation in the use of ground forces.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the very difficult position in which people

find themselves when they have a mortgage and there is violence in the home? Is he aware that my independent research into all high street banks and building societies suggests that they see houses only as financial institutions and not as homes? That has a significant effect on children who suffer violence in the home, too. Will he join me in calling on the Council of Mortgage Lenders to look urgently at its voluntary code of practice? Failing that, does he agree that we may need to take legislative action?

The Prime Minister: I would not commit us to legislative action, but I certainly agree with the point that my hon. Friend is making. It would certainly be worth while for the Council of Mortgage Lenders to consider what more it can do.

Q2. [64885] **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): In his pre-Budget statement only 11 weeks ago, the Chancellor confidently forecast that growth this year would be up to 1.5 per cent. Today, the Treasury's economic assessment team has published a survey, which forecasts average growth this year of only just 0.6 per cent. Will the Prime Minister explain how his Chancellor can be so spectacularly wrong in such a short time?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept that at all. As the hon. Gentleman has said, the average independent forecast is 0.6 per cent., compared with our forecast of 1 to 1.5 per cent. [HON. MEMBERS: "It is the Treasury's forecast."] Hon. Members shout out, "It is the Treasury". We are the Government. Here are the Treasury Ministers. The European Union forecast is fully in line with what we are saying, the International Monetary Fund is fully in line with what we are saying—so is the Bank of England forecast. Many independent forecasts in the survey are at or around the level that we state—or, indeed, above it.

As a result of the action that the Government have taken, we have the lowest long-term interest rates for more than 30 years, 400,000 more jobs have been created, and we have cured the fiscal deficit that we inherited from the Conservatives. Rather than the old boom and bust of the Tories—*[Interruption.]* We have now got them recognising it, too. Rather than the old boom and bust of the Tories—I remind them that interest rates were 15 per cent. for a year or more and at 10 per cent. for four years—we have interest rates coming down. That is the difference between Labour's competence and Conservative ineptitude.

Q3. [64886] **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the Tory legacy to people who live near the channel ports and the other ports of entry to the United Kingdom included an agreement to scrap duty-free goods, which, if implemented, would cost thousands of jobs; an agreement on indicative levels for duty-paid goods, which has generated a huge bootlegging industry; and agreements on immigration which have left many local communities struggling to support significant numbers of asylum seekers? Will he take the opportunity to tell us what progress his Government are making in clearing up this Conservative mess?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to do so. On duty free, my hon. Friend is right. As a result of what the Conservatives left us, we have to get unanimity to make any change—that was what they agreed—but, thanks to the present Government, we are trying to achieve progress on duty free. We have invested an extra £35 million in counter-smuggling measures, including 100 extra customs officers. It is the Labour party, in the asylum and immigration Bill to be published next month, that is trying to bring about a fairer, faster and more effective system of immigration and asylum after years of incompetence by the Conservative party.

Q4. [64887] **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): Is the Prime Minister aware, following a written answer yesterday, that over the past five years, there has been a 600 per cent. increase in the number of nurses coming into the United Kingdom on short-term work permits of under one year? Can he explain how the Government have allowed a situation to arise where health service managers, instead of investing in British nursing, are spending £35,000 a year each on overseas nurses, who then have to return within a few months without acquiring experience or knowledge, or commitment to the health service?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can easily explain that to the hon. Gentleman. The reason for that is that, in the early and mid-1990s, the then Government cut the number of training places for nurses by 4,000. As a result of what the present Government have done, an extra 2,500 people are now in training to be nurses. Over the next three years, as a result of the comprehensive spending review, we shall have 15,000 extra nursing places. We are putting things right, but it takes three years to train a nurse, and in the meantime, of course, we must try to bridge the gap from elsewhere. We are trying to do our best to clear up the nursing shortages within the national health service, and we will get there, but it will take time, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support us in doing so.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the huge groundswell of opposition among Scottish business to the separatist policies of the Scottish National party? Has he seen this week's MORI opinion poll, which showed that 75 per cent. of leading Scottish firms said that independence would be bad for business? In the run-up to the Scottish elections, will he continue to explain the risk to jobs posed by the SNP, and to set out the benefits to the Scottish people of a Parliament within the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: It is very simple: SNP in, business out. That is what would happen if the SNP were elected to a Scottish Parliament. Seventy-five per cent. of the firms questioned by MORI say that the SNP's only distinctive policy would be bad for jobs and business—which is probably why Scottish National party Members do not talk about it any more. The best thing for jobs and business is devolution within the United Kingdom—not the status quo of the Tories or the separatism of the SNP.

Q5. [64888] **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): Does the Prime Minister agree with the recent article in *The Observer* that stated that the only relevant experience of Lord Falconer for being put in charge of the dome was having been a member of a May ball committee at Cambridge? If the Prime Minister does not agree, will he

tell the House what qualifications or experience recommended Lord Falconer for his job, apart from having shared a flat with the Prime Minister in the 1970s?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend Lord Falconer does an excellent job. That is his best qualification.

Q6. [64889] **Mr. David Winnick** (Walsall, North): Has any invitation or request come from the Conservative Opposition that there should be a referendum on the question of hereditary peers? If such a referendum were to take place—perhaps it should take place—does my right hon. Friend agree that the number of people who would support retaining hereditary peers would be substantially less than even the amount of support that the Tories are getting in the opinion polls?

The Prime Minister *rose—*

Mr. Winnick *rose—*

The Prime Minister: My apologies. I thought that my hon. Friend's question was good enough as it was, Madam Speaker.

It is extraordinary that the Tories are still supporting hereditary peers in this day and age. The fact is that it is wrong that hereditary peers make legislation in the other place. It is doubly wrong when those hereditary peers are given a 3:1 permanent in-built majority in one part of our legislative Chamber. It was a clear commitment in our manifesto to get rid of the hereditary peers, and that is what we shall do.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Will the Prime Minister explain why it is that his Labour MEPs tabled a motion to censure the European Commission and then— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I did not hear the question because of the noise from Government Members. Will the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) please repeat it?

Mr. Prior: Will the Prime Minister explain why it was that his Labour MEPs tabled a motion to censure the European Commission for fraud and maladministration and then voted against it?

The Prime Minister: That is because they got the independent investigation that they wished, which was the right thing to do. I am really surprised that on this day above all days the hon. Gentleman raises the subject of MEPs, since he has just lost two of his own and half the Tory group in Europe voted with us.

Q7. [64890] **Mr. Tony Colman** (Putney): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the additional humanitarian aid and logistical support for the democratically elected Government of President Kabbah in Sierra Leone? Will he further join me in condemning the hypocrisy of those on the Opposition Benches who yesterday supported that policy when for the last year, they had opposed Government policy in Sierra Leone?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend lived and worked in Freetown and I acknowledge his special interest in this area. We are deeply concerned about recent events in Sierra Leone. Let me state the Government's policy very clearly again: it is to do everything that we can legitimately to help the democratically elected regime of President Kabbah. We welcome the co-operation that we have had with the Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces in trying to repel the rebels. We on the Government Benches, at any rate, believe that it is our duty to do everything that we can to help that democratically elected Government. We are proud of what we have done so far and if we can do more, we will.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The Prime Minister is reported to have encouraged the enlarged British Aerospace-GEC Marconi group to continue its negotiations with its European counterparts in the restructuring of the defence companies of Europe. Given that during the Gulf war, the Belgians refused to sell us ammunition, if control of such a key UK defence asset were to cease to be in the hands of this country, would that cause the Prime Minister any concern?

The Prime Minister: I sometimes wonder whether there are any limits to the anti-Europeanism on the Opposition Benches. First, the GEC-BAe deal is one that is very welcome from the companies' commercial point of view, but I make no secret of the fact that, yes, I want to see in the longer term European defence restructuring because I believe that it is absolutely in the interests of our country that that is the case.

We are living with a different type of defence industry, where there is enormous competition from the United States. We need big European players able to compete in that league. I am not interfering with the commercial decision of those companies, but I think that defence restructuring and closer links with Europe are a perfectly natural and right consequence of building a defence industry for the future that is in Britain's interests. I do not regard the fact that our companies enter into arrangements with Europeans as a betrayal of the British national interest.

House of Lords Reform

3.30 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement about the White Paper that the Government are publishing today about reform of the House of Lords. Copies of the White Paper and the Bill are available in the Vote Office.

The White Paper marks another significant and vital step in the Government's overall programme to improve the institutions of this country so that they fulfil their functions in a new century with energy and effectiveness and to create a modern Parliament for a modern Britain. The White Paper makes clear how a revised second Chamber would play an important role in a new constitutional settlement.

The outlines of the Government's proposals on reform of the House of Lords have long been familiar. They are threefold: the removal of the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords; reformed arrangements for the nomination of life peers; and the establishment of a royal commission to consider longer-term reform.

The White Paper confirms that all 750 hereditary peers will cease to have an automatic right to membership of the House of Lords. It also confirms that hereditary peers will be given the right to vote in parliamentary elections and to stand as candidates for election to this House without having to disclaim their peerages.

There will be no change in the position of life peers, who will remain unable to vote in parliamentary elections and unable to disclaim their titles. There will be no change in the position of either the Law Lords or the Church of England bishops.

The White Paper also confirms the undertaking that the Government have given that if, when the Bill reaches the House of Lords, there is a consensus in favour of an amendment to allow continued transitional membership of that House to some hereditary peers, the Government are minded to support such an amendment. I must make it clear that whether the Government are able to support such an amendment depends a great deal on the extent to which normal conventions relating to the Government's legislative programme are being observed.

The Government have always made it clear that we prefer to proceed by consensus. In that spirit we are prepared to accept the proposal if, indeed, it enables reform to proceed in that way. It is not a concession to be extracted by pitched battle; indeed, pitched battle will jeopardise the proposal.

The White Paper proposes an historic change—a change that has been discussed throughout the 20th century. Today, the Bill to abolish the right of hereditary peers to be Members of Parliament—a reform first suggested in 1911—has finally been introduced by the Government so that a fundamental anachronism can be removed as we begin a new millennium.

The presence of the hereditary peerage has weakened the legitimacy and effectiveness of our second Chamber for two main reasons—because the principle is wrong and because the results are unbalanced. First, with regard to the principle, it is wrong for anyone to have an automatic right to a seat in Parliament solely on the record of his forebears. Secondly, with regard to the results, the hereditary peerage gives one of the two major political parties in this country a 3:1 built-in majority in the House of Lords over the other. No votes by the electorate at a general election change that—the Conservative majority in that House continues untouched and untouchable.

The hereditary peerage, taken as a whole, is unrepresentative of today's Britain. It is unrepresentative economically, socially and by gender and ethnic origin. Consequently, because of the majority's predominance, the House of Lords suffers disproportionately from a political and social imbalance. That, too, is no longer acceptable.

Once the hereditary peerage is removed, the Government will move to rapid, full-scale reform of the House of Lords. There will be a period of transition, with which the White Paper deals in detail.

There have been many wild—frankly, ridiculous—assertions about the character of the transitional House. The most often reported assertion is that the House will be one created exclusively by this Government, and dependent on patronage by this Prime Minister.

The fact is that approximately 500 life peers will remain. Those life peers were appointed by eight Prime Ministers, over 40 years. Even without a single hereditary peer, there would still be a Conservative majority over the Labour party. None the less, this Government and this Prime Minister intend to reduce the Prime Minister's powers of appointment.

For the first time ever, the Prime Minister has publicly pledged himself not to interfere in the detail of nominations from other party leaders, provided that the nominations have been given a clean bill of health on propriety grounds. Moreover, for the first time ever, the Prime Minister will relinquish entirely his power to make recommendations for Cross-Bench peers. The power will be passed to an independent appointments commission.

The appointments commission will be encouraged to seek nominations from many sources, including members of the public. It will extend the range of interests and types of people represented in the House. The appointments commission will consist of members of the three main political parties and of independent members—who will form the majority, and one of whom will act as chairman.

The Government have always made it clear in our manifesto that no political party should seek to have a majority in the House of Lords. Therefore, far from seeking numbers—as we should be entitled to do without inconsistency with our manifesto—that are 40 per cent. in excess of those of the Conservative party, we plan to move only towards broad parity with the Conservative party.

We shall also ensure a fair representation of all other parties, and of the Cross Benches. The principles of broad parity and proportionate creations for the other political parties and Cross Benches should be maintained throughout the period of the transitional House.

Taken together, the proposals significantly reduce the Prime Minister's powers of patronage compared with those of all his predecessors. The result will be a better House that is more representative than the current one and better equipped to play its part in the constitution.

I should like, finally, to say a little about the longer term. The Government announced, on 14 October, that we would establish a royal commission to consider options

for longer-term reform. I am now pleased to be able to tell the House that Lord Wakeham has accepted the Prime Minister's invitation to be chairman of the royal commission. It is obviously important also that there is senior representation on the commission from this House. I am therefore pleased to tell the House that my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) also has agreed to serve on the commission. The remaining members will be announced in due course.

The commission's terms of reference, as stated in the White Paper, are:

"Having regard to the need to maintain the position of the House of Commons as the pre-eminent chamber of Parliament and taking particular account of the present nature of the constitutional settlement, including the newly devolved institutions, the impact of the Human Rights Act and developing relations with the European Union,

to consider and make recommendations on the role and functions of a second chamber; and

to make recommendations on the method or combination of methods of composition required to constitute a second chamber fit for that role and for those functions.

To report by 31 December 1999."

Those terms of reference are deliberately non-prescriptive. They are intended to stimulate public debate, as well as giving the royal commission its remit.

The Government have not indicated their own preference in the White Paper, but the two final chapters set out a number of issues which the Government think the royal commission will find it useful to address. It might be useful to highlight three points. First, the terms of reference defeat the accusation that the Government's proposals for constitutional reform are piecemeal. Secondly, the terms of reference ask the royal commission to consider the role and functions of the second Chamber as a preliminary to considering its composition. Despite assertions to the contrary, the Government have always felt that wide-ranging reform of composition cannot be decided in isolation.

Thirdly, the royal commission has been given a demanding timetable. That is evidence of the Government's stated wish to maintain the momentum of reform of the second Chamber. We believe that the timetable is achievable; after all, the debate has been taking place for most of this century. There is no need to undertake extensive gathering of evidence before any work can be done on analysis of the issues. Analysis and judgment are the most important requirements. However, I make it clear that the timetable does not provide an excuse for delaying stage one reform until the commission has reported.

The Government believe that we can make no long-term progress until the hereditary peers have gone. We are keen to maintain the momentum of reform, but for momentum to be maintained the process must begin now.

The package of measures announced in the White Paper sets out the Government's approach to this radical reform, which is nevertheless a careful and considered approach, starting with the most immediate and urgent reform of the rights of the hereditary peerage while identifying the path to longer-term reform.

In May 1997, our manifesto set out in the clearest possible terms our intention to legislate to complete the long-overdue reform to remove the right to sit and vote in our legislature by inheritance. Today, we take the historic first steps to give effect to that pledge.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I thank the right hon. Lady for her statement. I welcome the establishment of a royal commission on this matter, and welcome the choice of Lord Wakeham as the chairman, and the inclusion of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman). The independence of the chairman is not at all in doubt: Conservative Members remember him as one of the finest of Lady Thatcher's Chief Whips. We will make our own submission, based on the findings of Lord Mackay's commission, which was set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, when we realised—some time before the Government—that a full-scale review of the subject was required.

Let me make it quite clear that we do not question the legitimacy of the Government carrying out their manifesto commitment to remove the voting rights of hereditary peers. We have always said that we welcome reform, if it results in the better governance of the United Kingdom, but we question the wisdom of the Government's approach and their motives. The unnecessarily bullying language of the right hon. Lady does little to assist the debate.

The Government tell us that this is a matter of urgency, and they have set a deadline of December 1999. Why, then, was a royal commission not set up 20 months ago, when the Government took office? We could now be discussing the results of a royal commission and moving to single-stage reform by consensus. We also hear today that, beyond the royal commission, there is to be yet another stage—a Joint Committee of both Houses. Perhaps the right hon. Lady can tell us how long the Government propose that that will last. It was bad enough when we had to say, "No stage one without stage two." We were not counting on stages three and four, and whatever else may follow.

The Government's clear intention seems to be to kick the whole subject into the long grass. We will go into the next general election without knowing what Parliament will look like on the other side of that election. I must congratulate Ministers on protecting themselves from the spectacle of being unable to agree among themselves on the subject, as happened on proportional representation.

Any wise reform would have allowed the royal commission genuinely to examine all the relationships within and outwith Parliament—the relationship with the Executive and with the judiciary; the relationship between the two Houses of Parliament and the balancing of their powers; and our relationship with the new bodies—and how we scrutinise legislation.

The Government's intention, revealed in the White Paper, is not to examine Parliament as a whole, but is tilted towards de facto single-chamber Government. Their methods contradict their stated aims and will bolster the Executive in the House of Commons. It is out with ermine and in with straitjackets.

The combination of the delay and the restrictive terms of reference provide the Government with what they want most: an absence of real scrutiny or an effective

[Dr. Liam Fox]

check on the Executive. Despite their smokescreen, the Government will create a compliant halfway house of yes men, which they hope will last as long as possible. The Prime Minister will give up his right to appoint Cross Benchers—wow! So what?—but who will appoint the appointments commission? Perhaps the right hon. Lady can tell us.

We want a Parliament that keeps the Government in check, and we want Parliament to make our laws, not the Executive, judges or Europe. We want to strengthen the United Kingdom and ensure that power rests with the public, not with politicians. We shall work to make that come about.

In thanking the right hon. Lady for her statement, I should like to make one more comment—I hope that she does not take offence. The statement should have been made by the Prime Minister. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Previous Prime Ministers made statements on reforms of Parliament as a matter of principle. This Prime Minister has neither understanding of, nor interest in, the House of Commons. His silence, more than anything else, tells us about the Government's motives and their contempt for the parliamentary process.

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the proposals—I am glad that he was not unhappy with them. If I may begin where he ended, I am afraid that he is straightforwardly wrong. The most recent precedent on this matter was when a White Paper was presented to the House in November 1968—for some mysterious reason, the Conservative party never got round to presenting a statement on these matters while it was in power—and that statement was made by the then Leader of the House, Richard Crossman. There is a string of precedents, none of which, in the latter part of this century at any rate, suggest that a precedent has been set for the Prime Minister to make this statement.

In justice to the hon. Gentleman, it was clear that his remarks were drawn up before he read the statement—and before he realised that what the Conservative party has been spouting about the Government's intentions is complete nonsense. Most of his criticisms of the Government's proposals were clearly unfounded. He asked one serious question, which was about the appointments commission. The appointments commission will be what one might call a "Nolanised" body, which will go through the proper process governing public appointments that is now in train for non-departmental public bodies, following what was thought necessary in the previous Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman said many other things, most of which were either inaccurate or unhelpful, but I would single out one of his remarks as symbolising the nature of his response on behalf of the Conservative party. He said that he suspected the Government's motives and that the Opposition's motives were to keep the Government in check. I am sorry, but what came through with absolute clarity from the hon. Gentleman's comments was that the Opposition's motive is to try to keep a system that gives them a 3:1 majority in the other House.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): May I welcome my right hon. Friend's historic and long-overdue reform and commend her on the second stage? Important as the first stage—the abolition of hereditary peers—is, the second stage, with an independent element that may include references from the public, shows that the Labour party is committed to the sort of radical reform for which this country was famous in previous centuries but not, unfortunately, in the first part of this century.

Mrs. Beckett: I am more than grateful to my hon. Friend. He is right to say that this is an important step for this House and this Parliament. As the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said, we want something better. Even the transitional House that we propose will be infinitely superior to what we have now.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, may I give an unqualified welcome to the Government's proposals? In a modern democracy, the accident of inheritance should not entitle a person to sit in Parliament. However, a wholly appointed upper House cannot be an attractive, long-term solution. I particularly welcome the Government's indications of speed in moving towards the second stage of reform to establish the House of Lords on a democratic basis.

I also welcome the appointment of Lord Wakeham, not only because of his qualities, but because it shows the Government's continuing commitment to cross-party discussions and participation in the reform of the constitution. That is proper and helpful. Do the Government accept that, without diminishing the legislative primacy of the House of Commons, a predominantly elected second Chamber could complement and not displace the role of this House, and could strengthen the effectiveness of Parliament's oversight of the exercise of power by government?

Do the Government also accept that a democratic second Chamber could be the best place to ensure that the special, particular, different interests of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom are properly represented in Westminster?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the welcome of his party for the way in which the Government are handling this matter, and for his recognition that we are seeking to do so on as consensual a basis as possible. He tempted me to venture into territory into which I do not intend to venture: that is, to consider what may happen in stage two and what may be discussed in the royal commission. I am not prepared to do that, because we take the view that a discussion of the functions of the second Chamber should preclude discussions of its composition and how that is arrived at.

I accept the right hon. Gentleman's point that a different Chamber would be able to take account of different interests. As he will recognise, that is one of the factors that we have drawn to the royal commission's attention.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Is my right hon. Friend aware that 350 years ago this year the Commonwealth

Parliament abolished the House of Lords in a one-clause Bill that said, "The House of Lords shall not sit here or purport to sit anywhere else." Compared with that, the ingenious piece of constitutional modernisation that has been announced today must have tested the ability of philosophers of the third way, spin doctors and focus groups, and of such notable intellectuals as Lord Cranborne and the leader of the Liberal Democrat party. They have produced a scheme whereby, in the short term, hereditary peers will elect each other and will rub shoulders with people's peers, appointed and cleared of cronyism, who will have a job for life.

It is time that the Government made it clear that we are entitled to have an elected Parliament. We have an elected House of Commons, an elected Scottish Parliament, an elected Welsh Assembly, an elected Northern Ireland Assembly and an elected European Parliament. There are no grounds for fiddling with appointment panels to deal with cronyism or whatever. As the proposal that my right hon. Friend has announced was not put to the electorate or to the Labour conference, and was not discussed with Labour Members of Parliament, there must be a free vote at every stage during the passage of the legislation.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry to have to say that although I had hoped readily to agree with my right hon. Friend on this matter, I cannot do so. He is incorrect: no one will get a job for life, at least not in this legislature. That is the point of our proposals.

In common with the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), my right hon. Friend attempted to lead me into a discussion about what should happen in stage two. I have much respect for my right hon. Friend, especially for his excellent analogy which completely undermined the case made in the past by Conservative Members about the hereditary principle. He said that if one went to the airport and was told that the pilot did not have a licence but his grandfather did, one would not get on the plane. That is an admirably clear and succinct demolition of the hereditary principle.

I must tell my right hon. Friend, however, that if one factor has maintained the existence of the hereditary principle in our legislature throughout this century—certainly for the last 87 years—it is the frequency of the occasions on which all who wished for change became bogged down in the form that such change should take, rather than dealing with first principles first. The Government have every intention of doing that, and I hope and expect that every Labour Member will support us.

Sir Archie Hamilton (Epsom and Ewell): When the Government give evidence to the Wakeham commission, what view will they express on the delicate constitutional balance between the House of Commons and the second Chamber? Will they want the powers of the second Chamber to be increased or decreased relative to those of this House, or left the same—or have the Government not made up their mind? Are they embarking on one stage of constitutional reform without thinking their way to the next?

Mrs. Beckett: With respect, I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that his was yet another intervention bearing all the hallmarks of having been prepared with no prior study of what the Government propose.

The Government, as such, do not intend to give evidence to the commission, although the political parties are free to do so, and perhaps they will. As for the powers of the replacement Chamber, they would be a matter for the commission to consider. The right hon. Gentleman may, however, recall what I said in my statement, which I hope will be welcomed literally on all sides of the House. I said that, according to the Government's view and the remit of the royal commission, the House of Commons will be the pre-eminent Chamber of our legislature.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): My right hon. Friend is right to deal with the powers as well as the composition of the House of Lords. Is she aware that the more defensible the composition of the House of Lords is, the more it will wish to use the powers that it already has, let alone any increased powers that may be given to it? What proposals has my right hon. Friend to limit its powers during the first stage of the operation, which may last some time?

Mrs. Beckett: We do not propose to change the de facto powers that currently exist, but we have made it plain, as my right hon. Friend recognises—I am grateful to him for his welcome—that the royal commission and, indeed, the House of Commons will have to consider what the balance of power should be. We are clear about the fact that this Chamber must be pre-eminent, and that must underlie all the issues that are considered.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): Will the right hon. Lady admit that what she has said reveals that the Government embarked on the matter with no policy at all on the second Chamber, still have no policy at all and are trying to make a virtue of the fact? They think that a royal commission might come up with a policy, but not so quickly as to interfere with their legislative timetable for the remainder of the current Parliament.

Will the right hon. Lady turn her attention to what has already been said by her right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) about the position of this Parliament, to which we have all been elected, and the scrutiny to which this Government will be subjected? If I have understood correctly, the Blair Government are likely to remain subject to scrutiny by perhaps 91 hereditary peers—if they do not double-cross my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Cranborne—by certain life peers, who may or may not be peers for life when my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Wakeham has reported, by the Lords spiritual and the Law Lords, and by whatever new people the Prime Minister still intends to appoint to swell the ranks of his supporters in the other place? That is not even equivalent to "no policy"; it is unacceptable.

As the Government are in this situation, will they now introduce a Bill defining the powers of the second Chamber as subordinate to this Chamber, and reflecting what both the right hon. Members for Chesterfield and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) said about the need for the large elected element that we all know it will have to have? Will they allow the lightest whipping, and enable Parliament to decide as rapidly as possible what scrutiny there should be in the second Chamber? The Government propose to establish no sensible scrutiny at all.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that that intervention does not do justice to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's

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reputation in the House. Like those of many others, his questions bear all the signs of having been baked in advance. He accused the Government of having no policy at all. That is plainly nonsense. He fell into the same trap as the hon. Member for Woodspring.

The Conservative party does not seem to be able to make up its mind whether the Government are going too fast or too slowly on the matter. When it did not know that we were going to set a term date of a year for the royal commission, it accused us of dragging out that procedure. Incidentally, what a ridiculous accusation Conservative Members made that we were kicking the matter into the long grass. In fact, we are proceeding much more quickly in studying how we proceed towards stage two than most hon. Members had anticipated. It is evident that that was not anticipated by Conservative Members and it makes most of their contributions more than a little irrelevant.

On the issue of new appointments and so on, again, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is stuck in the mindset of the Conservative party in assuming that we would try to distort placements to that House in the way that has been done in the past. I remind him that there will still be 500 Members of another place, which seems an entirely adequate size of House to provide scrutiny.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman says that the Government proposal is totally unacceptable. I will tell him what is totally unacceptable. What is totally unacceptable is that, in this day and age, the House of Lords should have in it about 1,300 Members, 750 of whom can be there without having done anything worthy of note and give his party a 3:1 majority. We are not going to allow that arrangement to continue.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Lloyd George would have found amusing the enthusiasm of Conservative Front Benchers for reform, after 100 years.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should guard against the second Chamber, or senate, becoming a retirement home for politicians who are no longer active politicians—even those who might be appointed at an early age, but who get jobs for life, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) said? Would she be sympathetic to having a fixed term for those appointments, or a retirement age, to prevent that danger?

Mrs. Beckett: I share my hon. Friend's point about the enthusiasm of the Conservative party. Today, it is showing exactly the same enthusiasm for House of Lords reform that it has shown in the past. It would like to talk about it. We have been talking about it for 87 years precisely because the Conservative party has never managed to think of anything that would suit it better than the current arrangement.

My hon. Friend asks me whether we should consider a fixed term of appointment. I make the following comment genuinely, not to curtail debate: there will be plenty of opportunity for debate on that matter and on any alternatives that may come forward in stage two. However, I counsel my right hon. and hon. Friends and, indeed, the House not to get bogged down in what happens in stage two.

Dr. Fox: That gives the game away.

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, it does give the game away as to the tactics of the Conservative party. It has been discussing stage two for 87 years. It is time to get rid of stage one.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): As the right hon. Lady said, the last statement on Lords reform by a Leader of the House was made by Mr. Crossman, so she might care to recall what happened to him and to that statement. She talks about this House being the pre-eminent Chamber and about the recommendations on the role and functions of a second Chamber.

This House can be pre-eminent although considerable powers—much greater powers than the second Chamber has at the moment; powers perhaps to clip the wings of the Prime Minister—may be recommended for that second Chamber. Is the right hon. Lady saying that those powers would be acceptable to the Government if they were recommended? We do not want that to be subject to a wager, although the chairman of the commission is, I believe, chairman of the Tote.

Mrs. Beckett: I am, indeed, mindful of what happened to Richard Crossman: he got bogged down in stage two. Consequently, stage one was never achieved. It is not a precedent that I have any intention of following.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman—again, he tempts me on to precisely this territory—talks about the second Chamber's role and functions, bearing in mind that the House of Commons must remain pre-eminent, and he then goes on to talk about whether the Government will consider things that will, in his words, "clip the wings" of the Prime Minister. I simply say that the issue of role and functions—and, yes, that includes the powers—is one that the royal commission will consider, on which it will recommend and on which, ultimately, the House will take a view. One of the most noticeable things throughout the exchange so far has been that, despite all the absolute nonsense, and the very unpleasant nonsense, that has been said—not by the right hon. Gentleman but by others on the Opposition Benches—about the Prime Minister's unfettered use of patronage and power, not one Opposition Member has felt able to accept or to welcome the fact that this Prime Minister, unprecedentedly, is diminishing the Prime Minister's power of patronage. That is something that no Tory Prime Minister in history has ever even contemplated.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): As the late Dick Crossman's much put upon and much abused Parliamentary Private Secretary, I wish my right hon. Friend tons of luck, because she will need every ounce of it in this minefield. Is the appointments commission likely to show the same wisdom as the panel brought into being by the Labour party in choosing candidates for the Holyrood Parliament?

Mrs. Beckett: It is, of course, an article of faith that all panels set up by the Labour party in government, or as a matter party machinery, show wisdom.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) referred to 350 years ago. It might be wise for this Parliament to bear in mind that we may propose changes that ultimately the people will regret. I draw the attention of the Leader of the House

to the fact that she refers to three main parties and forgets that there are other parties in the House, some of which have no representation in the regions, and particularly in Northern Ireland. None of the three main parties is prepared to stand for election there. Surely a large majority Government should not be afraid of minority representation.

Mrs. Beckett: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. He will have noticed, I hope, that although I referred to representatives from the three main parties, on a number of occasions in the statement I also mentioned that it is the Government's intention to bear in mind the wish to see fair representation for all parties in Britain.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Has my right hon. Friend noticed from the exchanges that have taken place already, especially the contributions of Opposition Members, that if they are given an inch, they want a mile? My right hon. Friend, mistakenly in my view, has given them the chairmanship of the royal commission, and to a man who has a string of jobs already, yet the Tories are still as mad as a hatter. Why does not she think in terms of the third way? We have a Parliament for Scotland, we will have a Welsh Assembly and another one in Northern Ireland, and, in a few years' time, there will be one in every region in England. Why on earth do we need a second Chamber at all? Adopt the third way and get rid of it.

Mrs. Beckett: I have no doubt that, should my hon. Friend catch your eye, Madam Speaker, he will have the opportunity to pursue that idea at some length. With regard to Lord Wakeham taking the chair of the royal commission, I simply say that he has a long and distinguished career, including as one of my predecessors in the House, although it came as a slight surprise to hear the hon. Member for Woodspring say that he showed—what was it?—independence as Chief Whip. A variety of qualities are qualifications for the role of Chief Whip, but I am not sure that that has ever been regarded as one of them. However, I take it on board.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): As the main criticisms that the Government are making of the House of Lords appear to be that it is undemocratic, unrepresentative and unaccountable, can the Leader of the House guarantee that at the end of the process, the second Chamber will emerge as democratic, representative and accountable?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman identifies our case accurately. The House of Lords is uniquely undemocratic, unrepresentative and unaccountable. Even in the transitional stage, what replaces it will be better.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a good day for democracy, reaffirming to anyone who may have been in doubt that this is a radical Government? She is right to adopt a two-stage process and not to be tempted by those from either side of the House who want to get involved in the minutiae of what is to follow. There will be a spring in my step—I am sure that many of my hon. Friends share my feelings—when I walk through the Lobby to vote for the Bill.

Mrs. Beckett: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. I hope that his view will be shared.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): May we start from the premise that no rational person would defend hereditary seats in the House of Lords? *[Interruption.]* I said no rational person. Does the Leader of the House accept that the imbalanced proposals for the transitional phase look like a pig's breakfast? Will the royal commission properly consider the option of no second Chamber and the adoption of pre-legislative scrutiny in the procedures of this Chamber? That is how the Scottish Parliament will work, without the need for a second Chamber. Will the Leader of the House accept as a fundamental principle that if there is to be a second Chamber, the only way for it to be representative is for it to be elected? Finally, what self-respecting, elected, full-time Member of the Scottish Parliament would consider coming down to London on day trips if the second Chamber were still nominated and full of 500 cronies?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman suggests that there should be no second Chamber. That is not the Government's view. He appears to be suggesting that, whether it is a transitional House or a different form of second Chamber, no one from the Scottish National party would wish to serve in the upper House. That is a matter for his party. He also talked about the nature of the transitional House. It is my strong view that we would probably never get to the transitional House if we spent all our time wrangling about its ideal form. We hope and intend that the transitional House will not last for long, so the issue is less important. It will certainly be better than what precedes it, but it is not so important if it is not in what might be considered an ideal form. I cannot repeat too often that the reason why we still have a second Chamber numbering 1,300 or more Members when the issue has been under discussion for 87 years is that those who believe that the current situation is unacceptable have always been more interested in talking about what we should ideally have in its place rather than embarking on the process of reform. We shall never have a proper debate about how a reformed second Chamber should be until we begin to take steps on the existing Chamber.

Jacqui Smith (Redditch): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the many disadvantages of the hereditary principle is that it has created a significant gender imbalance in the second Chamber, where only 8 per cent. of peers are women? I do not want to get involved in the minutiae of the second phase. The removal of the hereditary peers alone will go some way towards righting that gender imbalance, but it is also important that the appointments commission and the royal commission consider ways of ensuring gender balance in the second Chamber.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. That brings us back to the effects of having a hereditary qualification for a seat in the legislature. The system has no regard for talent. It is not even the most interested or the most

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qualified member of an eligible family who is entitled to a seat, but in most cases it is the first-born male. My hon. Friend is right that that results in a House that is out of touch with today's world. I have no doubt that that will be taken into account.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): How can the right hon. Lady argue that the Government's approach to constitutional reform is anything other than piecemeal, given that she has just said that the position of the Law Lords and the Church of England bishops will not be considered in the reform? If the Government truly are looking at the constitution as a whole, why does the royal commission not have the power to consider the position of the Law Lords and the Church of England bishops?

Mrs. Beckett: That is not a matter that will be dealt with in stage one. The difficulty is that Conservative Members have certain lines that they like to use, irrespective of whether they have become irrelevant. It is clear that, although we are proceeding step by step and piece by piece, the reform is not piecemeal: it is an overarching programme of reform in which one part can intermesh with others.

The issue of the existence and the role of the Law Lords is, at least in part, also a matter for the judiciary and the judicial system. It was not thought sensible, even in the transitional House, to take steps to change that role. Similarly, we do not propose any change in the role of bishops in the transitional House. I have no doubt that if Conservative Members think that changes should be made in the transitional House, they will say so. However, we believe that it is a matter for stage two.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Thank you. We must now move on to the main business. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] We shall be returning to the matter many times over the next few months. Fear not—I shall remember those hon. Members who have not had an opportunity to ask a question today.

Orders of the Day

Greater London Authority Bill

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

[(Clauses 1 to 4 and Schedule 1 and 2)]

Further considered in Committee, pursuant to the Order [15 December] [Progress, 19 January].

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

4.17 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): On a point of order, Mr. Lord. Have you received a request from the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) to come here to correct the record from yesterday? During debate, it was suggested that the decision to abolish the Greater London council did not form part of the 1983 Conservative manifesto. I have read the 1983 manifesto, and it is perfectly clear that the proposal was included in it, so it would be appropriate for the hon. Gentleman to come to the Chamber to apologise.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael Lord): That is not a point of order for me, but a matter for debate. I have received no information of the sort the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Clause 2

MEMBERSHIP OF THE AUTHORITY AND THE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I beg to move amendment No. 27, in page 2, leave out lines 25 to 27 and insert—

'(a) begin on the first Monday in July following the ordinary election; and'.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 70, in page 2, line 25, leave out 'second'.

No. 65, in page 2, line 25, after first 'day', insert 'two months'.

No. 71, in page 2, line 28, leave out 'second'.

No. 66, in page 2, line 28, after first 'day', insert ', two months'.

No. 32, in clause 3, page 3, leave out lines 24 to 28.

Mr. Burstow: This debate should be relatively short and centre on the term of office of the mayor and the members of the assembly. The group of amendments raises issues on which we should like to probe the Government so as to ensure that we clearly understand their thinking on how those matters will operate. The effect of the amendments would be to provide for a transition period, from the time when the election of the mayor and the members of the assembly takes place to the time that they assume their responsibilities.

The amendments would also remove the Secretary of State's power to set the date on which the authority comes into being and starts to operate. The Bill as it stands provides for the Secretary of State, in effect, to act as mayor of London for about a month, during April, in the run-up to the elections for the Greater London authority,

and we do not believe that the Secretary of State should also have the power to change the start date of the authority. That is an unnecessary power and our amendments, if accepted, would make it clear that the assembly would commence its business and the mayor would start to act from July, so there would be no need for the Secretary of State to become involved.

I seek clarification on how Ministers envisage acting during the shadow period, when the new authority is in place but the members of that authority have not been elected. As we understand it, the authority will operate from 1 April. We must be clear about exactly how Ministers will discharge their powers on behalf of Londoners during that period. That is why we have tabled the amendments. I hope that the Minister will elaborate on how Ministers will be additionally accountable to London during that time and how we can ensure that we have the benefit of a transition period in future elections.

It has been said on several occasions that the Greater London authority presents an opportunity to experiment, innovate and try new methods of operation. The Liberal Democrats are entirely in favour of such experimentation, and we invite the Government to consider a further innovation in the workings of the GLA. Given that the legislation clearly separates the executive and scrutiny roles and that newly elected mayors will face a mammoth task, we believe that the legislation should provide a period of transition from a sitting mayor to a new incumbent mayor following an election to allow the latter to prepare for the task ahead.

The traditional model in general elections in this country, whereby an election is held and a losing Prime Minister must vacate his offices almost the same day, is ineffective and inefficient in the context of this institution. Yesterday, Ministers recognised correctly that we must examine each institution and construct it in a manner that is appropriate to the task that it performs. In this case, we believe that the Government should adopt that innovation.

The amendments seek to remove the power of the Secretary of State to decide the assembly's first meeting date and to put a clear date for that meeting in the Bill.

Mr. Ottaway: I speak to the amendments in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) and myself, which are similar in intent to those tabled by the Liberal Democrats.

It is clear that several lesser appointments will be made in establishing the authority—I do not wish to demean those who will ultimately fill those appointments; they are part of the new assembly's essential machinery. The key appointments will not be made until after the elections. Like the Liberal Democrats, we believe that a time interval should be permitted to allow the mayor and his advisers to make those appointments in their own time. For that reason, we think that a two-month delay in commencing the mayor's term of office would benefit the appointment process. We are not alone in that view. A few weeks ago, the *Evening Standard* stated:

> "There are genuine practical objections to an immediate handover, when the entire administrative structure to support the Mayoralty is being created from scratch."

For once, the Conservative party and the *Evening Standard* are in accord. That newspaper has not supported us for many years and I am pleased that it is beginning to come around to our point of view.

I do not advocate the mooted delay of several months to allow the Government to put in place their public-private partnership for London Underground before the mayor takes office. I think that that transitional stage is a disaster waiting to happen, and it will no doubt form the basis of much debate in Committee. I do not think that the mayor's term of office should be delayed at the Government's convenience. It should be for the convenience and benefit of Londoners. Under the circumstances, a two-month interregnum between the election and the commencement of the term of office seems right and appropriate.

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): The Government share the belief of the hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) that there should be a breathing space between the mayor and the assembly being elected and taking up the duties that the people of London will have placed on them by virtue of electing them. I am happy to consider the hon. Gentlemen's proposals before the Bill reaches its later stages.

The assembly will have direct responsibilities for appointing senior officials because it will be necessary to create an executive. It is proposed that there should be a shadow secretariat. I use that term in its widest sense. There will also be a need for the mayor to make appointments to the many executive committees that will be directly responsible to him. We simply need to consider the time that should elapse between the election of the mayor and the assembly and the commencement of their duties.

I turn now to amendments Nos. 65, 66 and 70. It is clear that there needs to be a pause because, as Government Members have made abundantly clear, the Bill proposes a new form of city-wide government, and the mayor and assembly will be responsible for designing a strategy to improve the quality of life in London by improving its transport and dealing with many of the other issues that we have already discussed. However, such a pause will be necessary only after the first election, which will take place in May 2000.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam made a point about whether there would be additional ministerial responsibilities during that interregnum.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): It is interesting that the Minister says that a pause will be necessary only after the first election because if there were a change of mayor, the new mayor would want to make appointments. He or she would not be able to do so before the election, so the same problem would emerge. The secretariat would remain the same, but the advisers appointed by the mayor would surely change and there would need to be time to make that change.

Ms Jackson: I find the hon. Lady's intervention bemusing. There is no pause in central Government after an election. There is no pause in local government after an election. The business that is the responsibility of local authorities and central Government goes on whether or not the political power in local authorities or the party in Government changes. The necessary structures that facilitate the work of political representatives sent to those offices by the will of the people support and sustain day-to-day business.

Mrs. Lait: I do not want to prolong the debate, but I want to tease out this issue. We are discussing a unique

[Mrs. Lait]

institution in which we are separating the executive from the legislature. In a parallel institution, the American presidency—a different institution from the one that I cited last night—there is a delay of two or three months while the new President puts in place the people that he has nominated. I view the role of the mayor, as part of the executive, as similar to that of the American President, so a new mayor would need time to make appointments.

Ms Jackson: I can only ask the hon. Lady to consider the lack of similarity between our proposals and the office of President of the United States. That point was made last night when we were debating another amendment. We are not creating a similar institution, and the powers of the mayor and the assembly are not the same as those of the President of the United States.

4.30 pm

The country does not grind to a halt after an election. The governance of the country is seamless. The day after a general election, there is no apparent change for the people of this country. The same is true in respect of local authorities. The kind of changes to which the hon. Lady is referring—changes of direction and of policy, very often coloured by political perspectives—are the responsibility of the people elected to high office, whether they be the Prime Minister, the leader of a local authority or, in this instance, the mayor, but the day-to-day business does not change.

I entirely understand that the introduction of the changes to which the hon. Lady refers takes time, but there is no necessity for an artificial break between election and the taking on of responsibilities, other than in the original, innovative, first-time-ever election for this particular form of city-wide government.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister clarify something that she said at the outset? She suggested that she would be willing to reflect further on the matter. They are not exactly the words that she used, but the implication was that this was an issue to which the Government were willing to give further thought. Perhaps I have leapt in too soon and she was going to say exactly to what the Government were going to give further thought, but, having heard the exchanges on this particular point, it appears that the substance of the amendment—the issue of transition—is not one about which the Government are ready to think again. Will the Minister give us a little more comfort and say that it is still an issue open to debate and further consideration?

Ms Jackson: I am sorry if I have not made the position clear to the hon. Gentleman. There is undoubtedly a meeting of minds between us on the fact that there should indeed be a period between the declaration of the results of the first-ever election of a mayor and an assembly and their taking on their full responsibilities. There should of course be such a period for the reasons that I have already touched on—the appointing of senior officials, the necessity for the mayor to appoint chairmen to the committees that are directly accountable to him, and, to repeat a phrase that I have already used, the actual creation of the necessary systems to ensure that the mayor and the assembly will be able to carry out the duties placed on them thanks to their election to high office by the people of London.

The clear difference of opinion arises over whether that should be a permanent fixture at every election after the first. We are prepared to take away and consider proposals about the length of time between the election result being declared and the mayor and the assembly fully taking on their responsibilities. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, having heard that, will withdraw the amendment so that we can return to the issue. However, the Government are not prepared to accept that the proposed period between the election result and the mayor and assembly being fully in place should be a fixture in perpetuity at future elections of the mayor and assembly for London.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Minister has made that very clear, and the Committee is grateful. I must press her on a linked point in order to understand the first part of what she said, which was about the first time around. Is she now also saying that the Government are willing to accept that for the first time around—we shall leave future elections to be dealt with later—the GLA will come into existence after the elections rather than before, so that the sequence will be elections followed by start date? If that is the case, it is a very helpful and welcome statement.

Ms Jackson: I am delighted to be able to respond to the hon. Gentleman with a categorical and enthusiastic yes. There will be no mayor, no assembly and no Greater London authority until the election results have been declared. In the light of that, I trust that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam will withdraw the amendment relating to the time between the election result being declared and the mayor and the assembly having the reins firmly in their hands, so that we can return to the issue later. The Government believe that that is necessary, but would want to examine it in more detail.

I hope, too, that amendments Nos. 70, 65, 71 and 66 will not be pressed. We have no intention of returning to them, for the reasons that I have already given.

Amendment No. 32 would remove clause 3(6). I would be grateful if it were not moved, so that we can return to the issue on Report. I shall be perfectly honest: I would require the expertise of parliamentary counsel because it is possible that clause 3(6) is unnecessary. I hope that both the hon. Members for Croydon, South and for Sutton and Cheam will accept the proposal that I have put to them.

Mr. Ottaway: The Minister made it crystal clear in the first 30 seconds of her speech that she was making a concession. Willingly, we shall not press our amendments.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) *rose—*

The Second Deputy Chairman: I call Mr. Paul Burstow—sorry, Mr. Davey.

Mr. Davey: I do not think that my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) would suggest that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and I looked too much alike.

The Minister has taken an important initiative by showing that the Government are prepared to listen.

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are always prepared to listen.

Mr. Davey: The Minister says that this is not the first time that the Government have shown that they are prepared to listen. However, it is certainly the first time in this Committee that we have seen signs that they are prepared to discuss matters outside the Committee and consider ways in which, together, we may improve the Bill, on a joint and consensual basis, to paraphrase their words in the Green Paper. We welcome that, and are certainly willing to withdraw the amendment—and, later, not move amendment No. 32.

I would, however, like to press the Minister on one point. She says that she agrees with ourselves and the Conservatives that it will take time to set up the authority and make all the appointments following the elections. Will she say on which date she thinks the authority will be established following the elections? I would be grateful if she intervened now. Given that she has not, I hope that we can establish that point very quickly. It would be helpful to future proceedings in Committee. Although we may need to decide later how that date is incorporated in the Bill, the information should be put in the public domain as soon as possible. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

The Second Deputy Chairman: The hon. Member who moved the amendment must withdraw it.

Mr. Burstow: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I anticipate that this debate will be no longer than the previous one. We shall make good progress on this, as on other issues.

We shall vote against clause 2 standing part of the Bill not because there has been no welcome concession from the Minister—for which we are glad—but because the clause deals with some of the matters with which we have just disagreed.

Ministers and the Committee know that we have accepted that the referendum decided certain things, such as the creation of the Greater London authority, of which we have always been in favour; that there should be a mayor, which we have always accepted; and that there should be an assembly, for which we have always argued. We have some problem not with the superstructure, but with the infrastructure. We had three objections and now we have two; we are making good progress.

We canvassed yesterday on the first of our objections—the size and make-up of the assembly. I shall not cover the ground again. We have a difference of view about that and we are on the record as to what that is. It would be illogical and inconsistent for us, having said yesterday that we did not think that things should be like this, to vote today that things should be as stated in clause 2.

Secondly—again, I shall not elaborate—we said yesterday that we preferred another electoral system. We had a good, interesting debate last night about electoral systems. I believe that there was acceptance across the Committee that appropriate systems must be chosen for the body concerned. The hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) made that point, perfectly reasonably, as did the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton).

Nevertheless, there is a difference of view between us. We have a preferred system; the Government have chosen their system. That is a perfectly honourable position, but there has not, on this issue, been the consensus that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said that we were in danger of achieving more often than I had expected.

Thirdly, before we started to debate the Bill this afternoon there was a disagreement about the start date, but we have made progress on that, for which we are grateful. We have one agreement and two matters on which we have so far disagreed—it is two to one against. On that basis, subject to any other hon. Member wishing to speak, we ask the Committee to vote that clause 2 does not stand part of the Bill, so that we may come back and get it into a shape that is more to our liking.

I anticipate that we may not win this time, but Liberal Democrat Members are ever hopeful. Given that, yesterday, we saw the great Labour-Conservative coalition working against us—the most recent example—we believe that we can continue to make progress and gradually break down the barriers of the old, tribal political divides. We look forward to that, but it does not mean that we cannot have the odd distinction of view and the odd difference of opinion. They are honourable distinctions, and soon I shall ask that the Committee be allowed to decide on them.

Mr. Ottaway: The Conservative party was in the same Lobby as the Labour party last night. We were united in our opposition to proportional representation as a method of election—

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is off message again.

Mr. Ottaway: It will be obvious from yesterday's debates that we disagree with the Government on several fundamental issues in clause 2. In the circumstances, we wish to divide the Committee on clause 2 stand part.

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): We have had some very interesting debates on clause 2. We have considered the titles of the mayor and assembly; a proposal for the direct election of a deputy mayor; the size and composition of the assembly; and a range of alternative—and, in some cases, mutually incompatible—voting systems, all proposed by the Liberal Democrats, plus another variation proposed by the Conservatives.

Mr. Hughes: The Minister, as so often in life, tells the truth but not all the truth. Those systems were indeed all proposed by us but, as I am sure that the Minister will be delighted to concede in his usual generous spirit, they were proposed as alternatives, in descending order of preference.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman stresses that they were presented as alternatives, in descending order of preference, but most hon. Members still have no idea which is the preference of the Liberal Democrat party.

We have also considered the timing and implementation of our proposals. We have agreed to give further consideration to the timing of the full implementation of the new Greater London authority at its first appearance. We have said that, at future elections, the traditional British system whereby the Government change very quickly without a period of transition will prevail, but in the initial stages it is right that there should be an opportunity for the new authority to be set up. We have listened to the views expressed and we shall come back with revised proposals, as we have undertaken to do.

Mr. Hughes: We are grateful. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton asked the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Transport in London, a question, and then the nature of the debate did not afford her the chance to reply. May I suggest that the beginning of July 2000 might be a nice date to start the GLA working?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman should have contained himself. I was about to respond to the point that his hon. Friend had made, to make it clear that, as yet, we have no clear predisposition as to the precise date, but we have listened to the views expressed by hon. Members in meetings outside the House and in today's debate, and we shall let the House know our conclusions in due course.

The Government have listened but, sadly, the opposition parties have not. The Liberal Democrats intend to divide on the clause despite the clear indications that were given yesterday evening when their proposals were the subject of Divisions. They might note, given the particular amendments to which they are still partial, that the Government majority on a Division yesterday evening on an amendment was 224, followed by one of 417. I am sorry that the Liberal Democrats appear not to have listened to the clear will of the Committee.

4.45 pm

The Opposition continue to peddle the concept of a deputy mayor. Having read a recent article written by the Leader of the Opposition, in which he explored matters relating to London government and the future of the Greater London authority and all the things that the Conservative party apparently thinks are important, it was fascinating to note that there was no mention of a deputy mayor. Either the right hon. Gentleman is not on message or the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) is not.

We do not regard the position of either of the opposition parties on these issues as consistent and effective. Given the decisions that were taken following Divisions last night, I have already given a clear indication of the preference of the Committee. I urge my colleagues to support the Government's proposition that clause 2, as presented, stand part of the Bill.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 308, Noes 167.

Division No. 40] **[4.46 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(Bham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam

Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Hanson and
Mr. Keith Hill.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*

Ross, William *(E Londy)*	Thompson, William
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*	Townend, John
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*	Tredinnick, David
Sanders, Adrian	Trend, Michael
Sayeed, Jonathan	Tyler, Paul
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian	Tyrie, Andrew
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*	Wallace, James
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*	Walter, Robert
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*	Wardle, Charles
Spicer, Sir Michael	Webb, Steve
Spring, Richard	Wells, Bowen
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John	Whitney, Sir Raymond
Steen, Anthony	Whittingdale, John
Streeter, Gary	Wilkinson, John
Stunell, Andrew	Willis, Phil
Swayne, Desmond	Wilshire, David
Syms, Robert	Yeo, Tim
Tapsell, Sir Peter	Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*	
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*	**Mrs. Caroline Spelman and**
Taylor, Sir Teddy	**Sir David Madel.**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

TIMING OF ORDINARY ELECTIONS

Mr. Ottaway: I beg to move amendment No. 5, in page 3, leave out lines 2 to 6.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 31, in page 3, line 2, leave out from 'on' to end of line 3 and insert

'the first Thursday in May in the year following the Royal Assent of this Act'.

No. 77, in page 3, leave out lines 4 to 6.

No. 67, in page 3, line 6, at end insert—

', such a poll not to take place more than four years after the previous election.'.

No. 6, in page 3, line 7, after '(3)', insert—

'The poll of the first ordinary election shall be held on 4th May 2000 and'.

No. 78, in page 3, line 10, leave out from beginning to 'subject' and insert 'Subsection (3) above is'.

Mr. Ottaway: I shall speak to amendments Nos. 5, 6 and 67. For the sake of convenience, I shall deal first with amendment No. 6, which would provide that the date of the first election is stated in the Bill. We believe that strongly.

5 pm

The Minister and his boss have proudly proclaimed that the first election will take place on 4 May 2000. I know that they are holding back a lot—not only reserve powers, but announcements to be made in orders—but that is one date that they do not have to hold back, because they have already announced it. We believe that the date should be in the Bill, if only to give some sense to amendments Nos. 5 and 67.

Amendment No. 5 addresses the point that the Secretary of State has reserve powers to announce when the second and third ordinary elections will take place. The Conservative party is deeply suspicious that that is not wholly unconnected with the declared intention in the local government White Paper to move the London boroughs to annual, or perhaps biennial, elections.

The Conservative party is happy with the present timetable for London elections—there is no need to fiddle with the dates—and we are happy for elections to take place once every four years. The Government want to move the dates of the London borough elections to try to increase turnout—that is a good intention—but there is absolutely no evidence that annual elections increase turnout. All the signs are that it makes no difference.

For one reason or another, elections regularly take place in May and missing the odd year does not seem to make much difference. The public will turn out if they want to, regardless of whether elections are annual or every four years.

Amendment No. 67 provides that, if we are unsuccessful with amendments Nos. 5 and 6 and the Secretary of State retains the power to hold the elections at his discretion, under any circumstance the term for the new authority should be not more than four years. A five or six-year term would not be acceptable.

There could be indefinite suspension of elections under the Bill. Although I do not believe for a moment that that is in the Government's mind, it would be safer, for clarity's sake, to confirm that no term could be more than four years. I hope that the Minister will give serious consideration to the amendments.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I shall speak to amendments Nos. 31, 77 and 78.

I am surprised that the Government have made it necessary for the Liberal Democrats and the official Opposition to table amendments on the timing of the elections. All hon. Members are agreed that there will be an election for the Greater London authority, but the date on which it will be held is missing from the Bill—unless we count the powers of the Secretary of State, who has infiltrated every nook and cranny of the Bill, to select a date of his choosing. Those powers also apply to second and third elections.

That leaves the process open to gerrymandering. We are considering the use of independent commissions to establish electoral structures and dates for elections, and the Government should consider that in this case. We need a clear steer on when the election will be held. We recognise that unforeseen circumstances may preclude putting a specific date in the Bill, but it most certainly should not be within the power of the Secretary of State to decide whether the election takes place at all. I should be grateful if the Minister responded to that point. What happens if, before the elections to the GLA are held, the Government change and the new Secretary of State is not favourable towards the establishment of a GLA? Will the Bill allow the Secretary of State to decide never to hold elections?

I hope that the Government agree that this serious point requires consideration and that our concerns are valid. I look forward to a constructive response from the Minister.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I very much welcome the two amendments in the name of my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South

(Mr. Ottaway). The amendments make an extremely important point—they show that the Government's attitude towards democratic elections is that they can be moveable feasts at the behest of the Secretary of State's diktat. That is not how the electorate want electoral dates to be set. The first election for the Greater London authority should be clearly stated in the Bill so that there is no possibility whatever of malpractice by the Government.

If the Government cannot impose a candidate who is acceptable to the Labour party leadership within the allotted time, they might wish to postpone the first election. If they decide that the election campaign has not been sufficiently well prepared, or if other extraneous circumstances that we cannot anticipate occur, the Government might change the date of the first election. Many are the occasions on which a date quoted in *Hansard* has, for various reasons, not been upheld, which is why my right hon. and hon. Friends are correct to insist in amendment No. 6 that the first date should be in the Bill—as, too, does the Liberal Democrat party in its amendments.

The election to the Greater London authority should not be affected by notional plans for the reform of local government in London. Let us at least get the format for the GLA right and the timetable for elections established in an immutable way, with which the Secretary of State cannot interfere, before we start to reform local government. The electorate wants the first elections to take place, as we have been promised, on 4 May 2000 and the second and third elections to take place four years thereafter. The Bill should not empower the Secretary of State to change the anticipated dates of those elections.

I hope that the House will be rigorous in imposing its view on this matter, because once we allow the timing of the elections to be subject to the Secretary of State's discretion, the matter is likely to become party political rather than constitutional. We must safeguard the democratic interests of Londoners.

Mr. Edward Davey: I had not intended to speak in this debate, but the comments of the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) have tempted me to do so. He raised an important point, which the House should consider: why are the Government not prepared to state in the Bill the date of the first elections? The Minister must answer that question if he is to convince the Committee. The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood said that it may be because of the internal machinations of the London Labour party, which has only just managed to agree on the selection process for its candidates. Those may be subject to review—we shall have to wait and see.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): As the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about the selection process, can he tell me who the Liberal Democrat candidate will be?

Mr. Davey: Details of our selection process have been published, and we are now approving candidates. There have been no internal squabbles in our party about the process. It is open and above board and follows democratic procedures. If the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) wants to intervene, I am sure that he can explain that his party's selection process is also democratic and open.

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman tempts me. Apparently, the leader of the Liberal Democrat party is at this moment resigning from office. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could enlighten us on the method of election for that post.

Mr. Davey: I have no knowledge of that. If it were true, any election would be open and democratic, as for many years we have been the only British political party to have a one member, one vote system for the election of our leader. I am glad that the Conservative party is modernising itself. It is about time, because for years it has been the most undemocratic party in Britain.

We have not had a good explanation of why the Government are not prepared to put the date of the election in the Bill. That may be because of the internal problems of the Labour party or because they are worried about the passage of the legislation. They may be worried about their opinion poll ratings in May 2000. Perhaps they want to leave it as late in the day as possible so that they can be sure of winning. Only time will tell, but Ministers should have more confidence and should be prepared to include the date in the Bill.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the hon. Gentleman explain to the House his apparent total lack of concern about the news that he has just been given that his party leader has resigned?

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. We should return to the amendment that is before the House.

Mr. Davey: I am tempted to answer that question, but under your direction, Mr. Lord, I shall not. At least our leader has given brilliant leadership to his party, unlike the right hon. Gentleman's leader.

The Government should, consistent with the Nolan recommendations, refer the date and the process of elections to an independent election commission. Having accepted the recommendations of the Nolan committee, one would have thought that the Government would implement them. There should be more transparency, certainty and stability in the management and organisation of elections. When the Government were in opposition they railed against secondary legislation and such decisions being taken by orders, but now they are in government they are changing their mind.

I support the arguments put by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake). I hope that the House will force the Government to put the date of the election in the Bill.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I rise to speak about the date of the first election of the mayor and the assembly. I do not know what the Government are up to with regard to the second and third elections, and as I am a bear of very little brain, I see no point in trying to unravel what they are attempting to do in the second and third elections until we know what they are doing in the first. As the Chinese say,

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

"On long journey, first step most important." I would feel much firmer on the ground under my feet if I knew what the Government were doing.

Uncharacteristically, I have a certain suspicion of the Government: I am not normally prone to such scepticism. Whenever we discuss dates with the present Administration, there is always a degree of fluidity as to when things are going to happen. That certainly applies to recesses. We still do not know whether we shall go into recess for the half-term holidays, although we are hearing noises about how difficult that would be.

I do not know whether the Government's uncertainty on these matters is dictated by—*[Interruption.]* I do not have the total attention of my Front-Bench colleagues, but Labour Members are listening to me attentively, and they are, of course, my most important audience. I do not know whether the Government's inability to give us firm dates is a function of profound incompetence or immensely sophisticated psychological warfare. Ultimately, I do not mind, but it means that we have to press to get the date.

5.15 pm

We were originally told that the elections would be in May 2000. There then crept into the public prints a story—which may not have had validity, but it sounded as though it came from someone who knew—that the Prime Minister was extremely anxious to have the mayor beside him in the dome on 31 December 1999, and that he really could not see in the new millennium without the mayor. I think that I could manage to do so, but it was said that it was important to the Prime Minister that this experience should be shared. When the story disappeared from our screens, I suspected that officials had been quietly briefing that there was no way in which the elections could be ready by autumn 1999, and that this was a foolish ambition on the part of the Administration.

It would be profoundly helpful if, at this stage, we could be definitively told—as I thought the Deputy Prime Minister had done in an off-the-cuff remark some time ago—that the elections will be in May 2000. As the Bellman said in "The Hunting of the Snark":

"What I tell you three times is true."

I look forward to the third time we are given the date of May 2000—I hope that that is what the Minister will tell us.

I look forward to that for another reason, which relates to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) in Committee yesterday. He was temporarily incorrect in saying that the Conservative party had never won an election for the London county council. Those present will remember that, as soon as I half rose, he immediately corrected himself and agreed that it had won.

In correspondence with the Minister, I have discussed the LCC election of 1949, when the Conservative party won as many seats as the Labour party, which represented a major swing to the Conservatives. The one Liberal who was elected said that he would vote with the Conservative party. The Labour party used a stratagem to ensure that it retained power, but I shall not go into that, because you would rule me out of order, Mr. Lord.

I do not resent the fact that the Conservative party got 120,000 more votes in London that day and yet did not win the election. I would not regard that as an argument for proportional representation, and I was happy to vote against all the Liberal Democrat propositions on PR yesterday, because it did not affect me. Such experiences concentrate one's mind on the small print when dealing with the Labour party in matters of Greater London. That is why I hope that we shall be given a date.

I do not think that that is an unreasonable request. We may have mutual doubts about the quality of the legislation before us. A learned lady—I think her name was Mrs. Hunt—once said that the entire administration of the Roman empire could be derived from the construction ut with the subjunctive. I do not have the same sense of total coherence and cohesiveness in this legislation, and it is not unreasonable for Opposition Members to ask to know the date of the first election. It may even make us more enthusiastic about the legislation than we have so far been.

Mrs. Lait: I endorse the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), although I would not go quite so far as he does in his two thoughts as to why no date has been given for the first election. I shall be charitable and say that it is an oversight.

Mr. Raynsford *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Lait: No, it is not. Clearly, some of the more Machiavellian theories are true. The Conservative party and the Liberal Democrat party are in the process of selecting their candidates for mayor in a clear and open way, whereas the Labour party is using this issue as a face-saving device to hide the chaos it is in.

We are clearly not going to get any satisfaction on this issue, but it is always worth a try. Certainly, Conservative Members will be very unhappy if no clear statement about the date is made in the Bill. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster pointed out, specifying a date would be quite an enticement to people to take an interest. Despite the Government's claim that there is great interest in London, we are not finding that people are desperate to vote for a London assembly. Having a date for the first election might help to provide democratic legitimacy.

I share the reservations expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) about the failure to inform us of when the second and third elections might take place. I am deeply suspicious about that: I suspect that the Government may wish to hold annual elections in London. In a previous existence, I represented two local authorities, one of which held annual elections and the other four-yearly elections. I agree with those who have said that it makes no difference: the turnout is the same. What is clear is that a small proportion of people are prepared to go out and do their democratic duty in all circumstances and at all times.

Mr. Wilkinson: I, too, have experience of both systems. Does my hon. Friend agree that four-yearly rather than annual elections would increase the likelihood of a large swing? Such an arrangement gives local authorities time in which to get on and govern, and also gives the electorate time to make up their minds on the basis of balanced judgments.

Mrs. Lait: I certainly think that it takes much longer to change the control of any authority when there are

annual elections. The problem is that, in such circumstances, authorities often end up with no overall control. The effect is, dare I say, similar to the effect of any form of proportional representation. No decisions are made; any decisions that are cobbled together are cobbled together behind closed doors, and no one who voted for any of the councillors concerned knows what policy will eventually be adopted. In fact, annual elections have two drawbacks, one of which is that they represent an unsatisfactory and unofficial form of proportional representation.

Not only do we need clarification of the second and third dates; as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) pointed out, there is a possibility of Machiavellian gerrymandering beyond a four-year term. At the least, we need an assurance that elections will take place within a four-year period. I am sure that none of us would find a longer period satisfactory.

Mr. Forth: I am not as charitable as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait). I suspect that there is something profoundly unsatisfactory—indeed, probably something sinister—about the Bill's present wording. I say that for an obvious reason. When it comes to a question as vital as elections and the timing of elections, surely the electorate—not to say MPs—are entitled to know at this stage where we stand, what we are being asked to approve and where we go from here.

As so often, the Bill says that all these matters will be determined by the Secretary of State. That in itself is profoundly unsatisfactory. We know the way in which the Government tend to make decisions: they make them on the basis of focus groups or opinion polls. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) was, I think, the first to point out, there is every possibility that the Government are trying to give themselves electoral manoeuvring space to ensure that the timing of the elections is arranged in the most favourable way according to what they are being told, or think they are being told, by the current focus groups or opinion polls.

That takes us back—although you will be pleased to learn, Mr. Lord, that I do not intend to rehearse the arguments—into the territory of referendums, and what I consider to be their invalidity, in the sense that the timing of a question is crucial to receiving the desired answer. We are, I think, entitled to suspect that is what the Government are after now: that they want to be able to time elections, whether the first or subsequent elections, on the basis of what they believe will be most favourable to them. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us credible assurances that will not and cannot be the case.

That leads us to the question—also identified by my hon. Friends—of the relative merits of yearly and four-yearly elections. I have two problems with the idea of annual elections, one being the simple problem of cost. There will be a serious cost penalty if we have to crank up the election machine every year and expect the taxpayer and voter to pay. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said, there is no evidence that annual elections will produce greater enthusiasm and participation; indeed, the opposite may well be the case. Until my hon. Friend put us right, I would have said that, if anything, the turnout for annual elections would be lower than that for four-yearly ones.

Another factor is continuity and stability of administration. Annual elections for any elected body mean the possibility, if not the probability, that control will change annually, preventing continuity or policy and producing what may well be a chaotic arrangement. That can be seen now in hung councils. Frequent control changes, as we all know, are a prescription for inadequate administration and inadequate policies.

Mr. Brake: Is the right hon. Gentleman honestly saying that every hung council that includes Conservative councillors is being run incompetently, and that those councillors are making no decisions?

Mr. Forth: No. I am saying that too many decisions are being made, and that they are often inconsistent and lacking in continuity of purpose. I accept that decisions must be made; I even accept, however reluctantly, that if the verdict of the voters is that there shall be no overall control, something must be done about that. My point is that returning to the electorate every year at least invites the possibility that they will alter the disposition of the council, and that there will be different arrangements, different coalitions and different control. That cannot be good for local administration.

The Minister has an obligation to tell us what arrangements the Government believe should be in the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) said, those arrangements should preferably be stated in the Bill. The Minister may argue that is not entirely reasonable—that it would be rash to name a date before the Bill has completed its stages and been given Royal Assent—but I feel that he should at least tell us the reasoning behind the Government's proposals, and reassure us that none of the unease expressed by Conservative Members is well founded. I hope that he can assure us, and the people of London, that everything will be done properly, and will be above board.

Mr. Raynsford: This has been a remarkable debate. It has been characterised by paranoia, and by astonishing suspicion about the Government's intentions. We have been accused of sinister behaviour by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), and of anti-democratic behaviour by the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). Before the hon. Gentleman makes further accusations of anti-democratic behaviour, he should reflect on the fact that it was his party that took from the people of London the right to vote for their own citywide authority.

We have heard paranoia from some Members who are prone to such tendencies: the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst probably fits into that category. I fear that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) is moving in that direction, but we also heard it from other Members of normally more sound and mature judgment: the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait).

I have to be charitable and assume that Members have been distracted. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, clearly, the news that their party leader is resigning has had slightly destabilising implications. I assume that, because the fear of losing members of one's party also has a destabilising effect, the loss of various Conservative

[Mr. Raynsford]

Members of the European Parliament has probably also had a destabilising impact on Conservative Members. In charity, I will allow that interpretation.

5.30 pm

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I will in a moment, but I have first to disappoint all the right hon. and hon. Members who have had paranoid delusions about our intentions. Let me explain why the date of the election is not in the Bill. The explanation is simple.

As hon. Members will recall, the Bill was published on 3 December. The date for the first election for the Greater London authority was only announced by the Deputy Prime Minister on Second Reading of the Bill on 14 December, so it was simply not possible for the date to appear in the Bill.

The position has now changed. As I have already made clear, we are a listening Government and are only too happy to accommodate reasonable amendments, even from other parties, if we believe that there is justice behind them. In that spirit, I am happy to assure hon. Members that we are happy to accommodate their wishes. The date is now known and it is possible to incorporate a date in the Bill. Therefore, I am happy to consider amendment No. 6.

I have to make one caveat. Because we have to have provision against the possibility of a national disaster, or an event that makes it impossible to hold the election on that date, there must be a consequential amendment that allows flexibility against such circumstances. *[Interruption.]* I can assure hon. Members that the resignation of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst would not be a national disaster and would certainly not require the postponement of elections to the Greater London authority.

Subject to that one caveat, we will be happy to consider the amendment and come forward with a further amendment that puts the intended election date in the Bill. We ask Opposition Members, for reasons that I will explain, to agree that the amendments that would remove the Secretary of State's power to make an order setting the dates on which the second and third ordinary elections would be held should be withdrawn. I would be happy to discuss with the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) between now and Report the form that those consequential amendments should take.

We do not seek that flexibility because we have a sinister and secret agenda to amend the dates of the first and subsequent elections for political advantage. We are as anxious as everyone else that the GLA should be elected at the earliest practicable date, but, for the practical reasons to which I have referred, the dates cannot become immutable. We must be able to respond to unforeseen circumstances that might make the postponement of the election unavoidable.

Conservative Members' protestations would have been more convincing if the legislation that they introduced to set up the Greater London council in the first place—the London Government Act 1963—and, indeed, the Local Government Act 1972, had provided for the first ordinary elections to counties and districts to be fixed not by statute, but by the Secretary of State. Therefore, their record in government was not blameless.

Having said that, we intend to ensure that there will normally be a period of no more than four years between elections, but we need to allow an element of flexibility, not least because of the possibility of further primary legislation being introduced in relation to the dates on which London borough elections will be held. For that reason, we believe that it is necessary to retain clause 3(2), which enables the dates of the second and third elections to be moved if that becomes necessary.

In the light of the commitment that I have given to consider amendment No. 6, I hope that the hon. Members for Croydon, South and for Carshalton and Wallington will now agree to withdraw their amendments.

Mr. Brake: I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said. I hope that he noted that the Liberal Democrats were very calm and collected throughout the debate, regardless of what was happening elsewhere.

The Minister has made a major concession and I am happy not to press my amendments.

Mr. Brooke: I have not been specifically provoked by the Minister, but I could see that my father's role in the 1963 legislation was going to play a part in our proceedings. On behalf of the spirit of my late noble father, I will say that there was a long gap between Second Reading in 1962 and the election in 1965—a longer gap than that which prevails between today's debate and the date of the first election, so the then Government can be excused for not having set the date.

It is rare that any speech of mine or of my colleagues produces so immediate a concession and favourable response from the Government. I am grateful to them. However, I note that the explanation as to why the date was not in the Bill was that 11 days passed between publication of the Bill and Second Reading. The Government were unable to make up their mind by 3 December, but were able to make up their mind by 14 December, or whatever the date was.

The spirit of my noble father draws the Prince of Denmark briefly into the debate. I was Under-Secretary to Sir Keith Joseph, that great man. The job of Under-Secretary to that great man, who spent an enormous amount of time pacing the battlements of Elsinore, was occasionally to dart from a turret, tug him by the sleeve and say, "Secretary of State, the time has come to make a decision." I had not previously thought of the Deputy Prime Minister as suffering from the same degree of indecisiveness. Indeed, in physical terms, if I were to put them together in the same frame, I would have cast the Deputy Prime Minister in the role of Sancho Panza and the late Sir Keith in the capacity of Don Quixote. Why the Government could not make up their mind by publication of the Bill on 3 December remains a major mystery.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am afraid that I cannot match the invocation by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) of noble shades or ancestry, or even match his literary allusions. However, I should like to probe the Minister more on one particular adverb: normally.

The Minister said that the second and third election dates could be affected by changes, notional at this stage, in the timetable for the elections for the London borough councils. Should not the election of the mayor and assembly of the Greater London authority have primacy? Should we not set a fixed timetable of a four-year term starting from 2000? Why do we need to change the second and third election dates?

If we are going to change the term, the Minister suggests that it might be extended. Might Londoners not want it to be curtailed, rather than extended? Therefore, I insist again that it is not correct to give the Secretary of State power to alter the dates of the second and third elections on the basis of what remains a hypothetical possibility: changes to the timetable for London borough elections, which Parliament has not yet approved.

Mr. Ottaway: I should like to say how much I appreciated the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). As we still have some 274 clauses to go and he is on the Committee, perhaps we might get one or two more speeches such as that from him.

The Minister has made a generous concession. I would not say that we are entirely happy with his reaction to the two amendments, but, under the circumstances, we think that his approach to the clause is right. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4

VOTING AT ORDINARY ELECTIONS

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I beg to move amendment No. 8, in page 3, line 38, leave out from 'system' to end of line 39.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 9, in page 3, leave out lines 40 to 45.

No. 35, in page 3, line 41, leave out 'supplementary' and insert 'alternative'.

No. 36, in page 3, line 43, leave out 'a supplementary' and insert 'an alternative'.

No. 37, in page 3, line 45, leave out 'first and second'.

No. 51, in schedule 2, schedule 2, page 143, leave out lines 5 to 17 and insert—

'(2) The candidate with the fewest number of first preference votes is eliminated, and the second preference votes given for that candidate shall be ascertained.

(3) The second preference votes under subsection (2) above shall be transferred to the other candidates, being added to the first preference votes cast for the other candidates.

(4) If, following the recalculation under subsection (3) above, none of the candidates receives more than half of the votes, the remaining candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated and the procedure in subsections (2) and (3) above is carried out.

(5) The process continues until one candidate has received more than half of all the votes, and that person shall be returned as Mayor.'.

No. 48, in schedule 2, page 143, line 20, leave out from 'the' to 'which' and insert 'Assembly shall decide'.

Mrs. Shephard: Amendments Nos. 8 and 9 have the effect of establishing a first-past-the-post system for the election of the London mayor. The Minister has sought to demonstrate his credentials as part of a listening Government, and he has with his acceptance of some of the points made in the previous group of amendments. We shall test him further when we make our case for this group of amendments.

The Minister will know, because we have made these points on a number of occasions both on Second Reading and in Committee on the Floor of the House, that we are concerned with the clarity and transparency of electoral arrangements for assembly members and now, this evening, for the election of the London mayor.

Our concern for clarity extends to the selection of candidate for mayor, which will not involve caucuses, closed doors or smoke-filled rooms, but one member, one vote and the utmost transparency at every stage. We have a clean slate with regard to our own party selection arrangements.

As I said yesterday, and it is not disputed, the Bill is a substantial piece of legislation which will, in effect, set up an entirely new form of government. As the Minister will know, we feel that some of the Bill's proposals do not contribute to the principles of transparency and accountability which we look for in local government, because of the proliferation of bodies, agencies, duties and overlaps that they introduce.

In addition, the provisions that we are debating this evening will oblige Londoners to use three different voting methods for two elections to be held on the same day—first past the post for the 14 constituency assembly members, a form of proportional representation with a closed list for the 11 London assembly members and, for the mayor, if there are more than two candidates, a supplementary voting system.

All of that would be difficult enough, but the Government are subjecting our capital city and much of the rest of the country to unprecedented constitutional change. Notwithstanding what was said in the House earlier this evening, the Opposition's view that the Government's approach to all this constitutional change is piecemeal, is shared by the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, which, in its second report on the operation of multi-layer democracy which was published on 18 November 1998, said:

"Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is only one part of re-writing of the Constitution which is currently taking place. As far as we can see, this reform is being conceived piecemeal; if there is an overall blue-print showing how all the pieces will fit together, none of our witnesses were aware of it."

Thus we see different systems and different voting procedures being introduced in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, with some recent rumblings from the direction of Hull, East about regional government in England as well, with no thought as to how, if at all, these new bodies and their functions will interact or affect one another. Such an approach is not only irresponsible, but it strikes at the very heart of democratic accountability by blurring and confusing the processes with accretions and overlaps.

It has to be remembered that Londoners will face no fewer than four intermediate layers of government between local authorities and central Government—the mayor, the assembly, the London development agency and the Government office for London. There will also be a transport body for London, the Metropolitan police authority, a London fire and emergency planning authority and the cultural strategy group.

[Mrs. Shephard]

I am aware that on Second Reading the Deputy Prime Minister pointed out that the mayor would be accountable for a number of those bodies and that there would, therefore, be accountability. But that proliferation of bodies and the consequent overlap of responsibilities could be confusing, and Londoners could be forgiven if they did not know exactly whom to hold accountable for policies affecting them.

5.45 pm

In addition, the Bill contains 277 clauses which set powers; introduce new rules, orders, functions, standards and regulations; plan audits; establish committees; set charges and levies, and provide for a set of new agencies. Against that background of wholesale change to be imposed on Londoners and against the confusion of accountabilities that the Bill, of necessity, introduces, the Government should pause to examine whether it would be better to retain a voting system to elect a mayor which is tried and tested, and familiar and comprehensible to the electorate.

We recognise that there is a case for a voice for London. That voice will be the mayor's. She will speak for London, to national Government and for London on the international stage. It was because we recognised the need for a voice for London that we recommended a yes vote in the referendum. The Government will no doubt argue that because the function of elected mayor is a new one—we would say an experimental one—it should be achieved with a new voting procedure. But we would argue that it is precisely because the Bill throws so much else into the air that a first-past-the-post, tried, tested and understood voting system should be used to elect London's mayor.

Leaving aside whether Londoners will welcome the range of different voting systems that they will have to face at borough, assembly, mayoral, parliamentary and European levels, which the Government are imposing on them, is not the reality that, in the end, there will be only two or three strong, high profile, credible candidates for the post of mayor? Would it not be better for the successful candidate to be able to say, "I was elected because I won a clear majority", not "I was elected because I was the least unacceptable candidate"—which could, to quote the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), be the effect of the broad based, superior, majoritarian system being proposed.

I move the amendments in the interests of clarity, decisiveness and comprehensibility.

Mr. Burstow: I start by picking up one or two points made by the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard). As she spoke, I thought of the proliferation of different bodies that will have a responsibility in the running of London when the Bill is enacted, and then I thought back to the proliferation of bodies that emerged from the abolition of the GLC, some of which I jotted down—the London planning advisory committee; the London fire and civil defence authority; the London grants committee; the London transport committee, which previously included two or three other agencies; the London ecology committee; the traffic director for London, and the London waste regulation authority. So many different agencies and bodies were established by the previous Government to continue the governance of London by other means as a consequence of the abolition of the GLC, that I find it strange that the right hon. Lady now prays in aid the creation of so many new bodies as an argument for the alleged simplicity of the first-past-the-post system.

That goes back to some of the points made in yesterday's debate about the proposal that each of the boroughs should nominate appointments to those bodies. Perhaps it is a case of hankering after the structures which were put in place by the previous Government when they abolished the GLC, and a continuation of indirect representation on these London bodies, which has not worked particularly well during the past few years.

Amendments Nos. 35, 36, 37 and 51 deal with the fundamental issue of the method of election of the mayor. They would put in place the well known alternative vote system, which allows voters to express more than the two preferences allowed by the supplementary vote system proposed by the Government. Under the supplementary vote system, voters will have to make guesses and consider how to vote tactically in the election of the mayor. Many of those who made representations during the consultation period said that AV would eliminate the guesswork and result in a simpler system that would produce a better outcome for Londoners and for the governance of London.

The supplementary vote system can produce strange results. The Electoral Reform Society's document on electing the mayor—which has been referred to by other hon. Members in various terms, some not quite so glowing—gives an interesting worked example of how the system can produce perverse results in particular circumstances. In the first stage, the votes of four candidates are split evenly: the Conservative candidate gets 27 per cent. of the vote; an independent candidate gets 26 per cent.; the Labour candidate gets 24 per cent.; and the Liberal Democrat gets 23 per cent. Some hon. Members may regard that as an unreal example, but the situation has occurred in real elections, so the Electoral Reform Society's worked example is valid.

With no candidate getting a majority of the votes cast, the two top candidates go through to the next round and the others are eliminated. The second preference votes of the two eliminated candidates are examined and added to the totals of the votes for the top two. Second preferences for candidates other than the top two do not count. If the Liberal Democrat voters chose to vote for the Labour candidate as their second preference, those second preference votes would be wasted. If those voting for the Labour candidate split their second preferences equally between the independent and the Liberal Democrat candidate, half of those second preferences would also be wasted. The winning candidate in this example is the independent, with 38 per cent. of the vote. That is not a way to produce a strong majoritarian system of the sort described yesterday by the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton). The system is not fair because it does not allow all those in London who choose to exercise their vote the opportunity to express their preferences.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): The hon. Gentleman is arguing the case for AV. Will he confirm that under that system a candidate placed third on the first count could win the election?

Mr. Burstow: I am happy to confirm that that is a potential outcome of the system, which would enable Londoners' preferences to be properly reflected. This is clearly another debate in which we shall have the unusual spectacle—perhaps not today, but on Report—of large numbers of hon. Members voting together in an unholy alliance to preserve their interests. In an earlier debate it was said that voting systems were all about vested interests. We all have vested interests in the way in which voting systems work.

Mr. Forth: In the current circumstances, how can the hon. Gentleman claim that the Conservative party's support for first past the post is in its immediate interests?

Mr. Burstow: Perhaps the Conservative party should reflect on that. As we said yesterday, we want a voting system that allows the electorate to choose the people whom they want to represent them and allows those wishes to be properly reflected in the assembly. The current first-past-the-post system often denies the electorate the opportunity for their wishes to be truly reflected in their assemblies. That defect needs to be corrected. The alternative vote would go a long way towards dealing with that.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Perhaps my hon. Friend would like to reflect on the other side of the question that the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) properly asked. What is the difference between the election of a candidate who comes second in the first round and the election of the candidate who comes third—perhaps only 1 per cent. behind the second placed candidate? We either have a system in which a candidate wins on the first ballot—the first-past-the-post system, which everyone understands—or we have a system in which the person who comes first the first time may not win because someone else could come through.

Mr. Burstow: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. Yesterday he rightly identified himself as not being an electoral reform anorak. I do not wish to wear such an anorak either, but these are important issues.

The Green Paper "New Leadership for London" did not mention the supplementary vote system as one of the possible methods for electing the mayor. It advanced three options: first past the post, which is the Conservative party's preferred option; the second ballot method, which is used for French presidential elections; and the alternative vote. In the White Paper—

Mr. Raynsford: I should like the hon. Gentleman to clarify a simple point. Does he recognise that the effect of the supplementary vote is the same as the effect of the French system, but the ballot is carried out on one day rather than on two?

Mr. Burstow: The procedures are not the same, because having a second ballot removes the tactical and guesswork voting that results from it all happening on one day. That is our criticism of the supplementary vote. We made our criticisms of the second ballot clear in our response to the Green Paper.

The White Paper described the supplementary vote as a simplified form of AV. Whom are we simplifying it for? It is patronising to say that the electorate cannot cope with marking "1", "2", "3" and "4" on a ballot paper to express their preferences.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The electorate wants the system because it is simple. Focus groups have said that supplementary vote is the system that they want.

Mr. Burstow: Some hon. Members sometimes feel that the Government are led too much by focus groups. Reliance is being placed on one focus group to support the contention that SV is the preferred system. When the issues are explained in more detail, there will be greater support for the system that we and many others outside the House propose.

The House debated the issue in 1931. I am sure that some hon. Members will now scurry off to the Library to check *Hansard* on that. A Bill was introduced to bring in the supplementary vote. After deliberation, the House decided that the alternative vote should be introduced instead. The Bill fell because of the undemocratic institution at the other end of this building, whose Members decided that they did not agree with it. That is another reason why the statement earlier today is welcome.

The supplementary vote is used only in Sri Lanka, for the election of the president. It was briefly used in Alabama in the early part of this century. Alabama abandoned the system because of a result in 1926, when the winning candidate secured only 29 per cent. of the first and second preferences. That is why the supplementary vote is not an appropriate way to elect a strong and effective mayor in the terms that the Government are proposing.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I must correct the hon. Gentleman again. The supplementary vote is not used in Alabama or Sri Lanka. That system is a variation, in which three preferences are recorded on the first ballot. Under the supplementary vote, the first and second preferences are recorded.

6 pm

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and happy to stand corrected on that point. We would have to call that supplementary vote plus—an innovation that takes us in the right direction, towards the alternative vote, the use of which we advocate. In Alabama, the supplementary vote system no longer operates, but my point is that it was used at the beginning of the century. The Institute for Public Policy and Research recommended the alternative vote for electing the mayor of London, saying:

> "We therefore recommend that the mayor be elected using the AV system. It overcomes the main drawback to first past the post, ensuring that the winning candidate has the support of over 50 per cent. of those voting."

Amendment No. 48 provides for the possible outcome of using the supplementary vote of a result tied between two candidates. It addresses the question of whether a tie should be resolved by drawing lots—that is, by chance—or by giving the assembly a role in making a decision. We contend that the assembly should have the right to

[Mr. Burstow]

make a decision in cases where the election has not produced a conclusive result and two candidates emerge from the supplementary vote system with equal votes.

The amendments would increase voter choice and ensure that the mayor will start with a strong and clear mandate. That is why we have tabled them and we look forward to getting as much support in the Lobby as we can possibly secure.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): I have already enjoyed one debate on clause 4, so it will be useful to me to participate in another one tonight, even if the outcome will be the same.

In the light of the news breaking as we speak, I wish the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) well, as probably the only London candidate in the forthcoming election. I know of no Member of Parliament who deserves more than he to have what is quintessentially a dead-end job going nowhere—surely it must be preferable to come a miserable third in the mayoral election.

Tonight, in respect of the amendments to clause 4, we have heard again many of the words that were blithely thrown around yesterday in respect of clause 2. Yesterday, it was the PR anoraks who were doing the throwing, but tonight they have been joined by the first-past-the-post anoraks on the Conservative Front Bench. Tonight, we have heard two perorations on alternative systems to the one proposed in the Bill. Lots of little words have been thrown around, but no significant justification has been offered as to why either first past the post or the alternative vote system are preferable to the supplementary vote system for use in the mayoral election. Neither argument has been rooted in what the office of mayor is all about or how it fits in with the overall structure; nor have the speakers, having established what the mayor is supposed to do for London, justified their choice of electoral system.

That is why, last night, my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction was entirely right to dismiss the PR and first-past-the-post lobbies as anoraks. They start from some notion of purity in electoral systems, but fail to work out how their chosen system will fit in, even though they claim to have done so. Instead, they use a blithe little lexicon that assumes that they have discussed the merits of both the role of the mayor and the electoral system.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) says that the system she prefers is better because it is more transparent. If pressed to explain why it is more transparent, she simply restates that it is more transparent. It is sub-intellectual and febrile to believe that if something is said often enough, it becomes true: an election system is transparent because it is transparent because it is transparent. We get the same sort of argument from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), whose personal dynamism leads us to hope that he will not be the election agent for the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk must recognise that, rather than three different electoral systems for different bodies being a flaw in the Bill, they are in fact the Bill's glory and strength. We need the 14 directly elected members to take the authority some, albeit not all, of the way towards parochialism, thus giving it some local basis, albeit in super-constituencies. However, to reflect both the diversity of London's communities and the relative strengths of the political parties in London, we also need a degree of proportionality. That there are to be directly elected members as well as supplementary or additional members is not a flaw, nor is the fact that there is to be an entirely different system for electing the mayor. Anoraks apart, people recognise that the institution should determine what electoral system—or systems—is appropriate to fill it, not the other way around.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman made exactly the same point yesterday about the voting system for the assembly. He said that the system was wonderful and ideally crafted for the purpose the assembly is to fulfil; however, he did not explain the link between the system and the purpose, nor has he done so today. I do not doubt that he is such a loyalist that, whenever the Government come up with a system, he will say that it is wonderful and perfect for the purpose. However, I have not said, either yesterday or today, that the proposed systems are entirely inappropriate. If he is to be true to his own arguments, the hon. Gentleman has to explain why the proposed system, which was in part devised by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and is to be uniquely applied in Britain, is the perfect system, when many others that are already used, in both this country and others, work perfectly well.

Mr. McNulty: I know that, more often than not, the hon. Gentleman is polite, but I also know that he must be seen to attack Labour in such a distasteful manner if he is to establish his leadership credentials, so I shall let him off for now. If we have a clause stand part debate on clause 4, I shall certainly elaborate on why the proposed system is the appropriate electoral system for the institution of mayor. However, with my limited grasp of parliamentary procedure—a failing which Madam Speaker and her deputies have had cause to bring to my attention on many occasions—I thought that the current debate related to the amendments tabled by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives and I was endeavouring to stay in order. If we have a broader debate, I shall be happy to oblige the hon. Gentleman.

I am sorry to say that colleagues on the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs were wrong to say that the reform is piecemeal. We are making constitutional change in appropriate areas and our agenda is as clear as day. Although it might be slightly off message to say so, I am at one with the rumblings emanating from Hull, East about having a regional tier of government for England to fit in with the rest of the jigsaw. With the greatest respect to all those who serve on Select Committees, I have to point out that the fact of an opinion being expressed in a Select Committee report does not make it right.

It is not irresponsible or blurring by accretion to have a plethora of different electoral system and institutions that are appropriate to regional responsibilities. Unlike the way in which the body politic and all its parts developed during the 18 years of Tory Government, all the developments made under Labour are, at root, democratic. Opposition Members might think that a trite point, but I happen to believe that it is fundamental to our entire constitutional agenda that all the elements are democratic.

It is rather lame to say that first past the post is tried and tested, so if we have an election for a single post, we should use first past the post and ensure that we get a recognised voice for London. That is the old "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" argument, and no consideration is given to the context within which the London mayor is to operate, or to London's diversity. No single system is ideal. All we can do is try to use each system appropriately and I believe that, on balance, the system set out in the Bill is the most appropriate.

Neither is it the case—this argument is equally weak—that we have decided to introduce a new electoral system for this novel new post. That might be how the new "British way" Conservative party organises policy, but it is not how we do it. We organise policy in a far more responsible manner. If I thought that first past the post would be more appropriate given the nature and role of the mayoralty in London, I would say so.

In recent months, we have had many nauseatingly boring debates in this Chamber about electoral systems. The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk said that a mayor elected under first past the post could claim to have a clear majority, but nothing could be further from the truth. Many hon. Members in this place are not elected by a clear majority. I suspect—I have not done the research—that very few hon. Members could put their hands on their hearts and say that they were elected by more than 50 per cent. of their electorates. I was not, and I am sure that many of those opposite were not either. I was elected by 52 per cent. of the 70 per cent. of people who voted. I asked whether hon. Members were elected by more than 50 per cent. of the electorate, not of those who bothered to vote. Very few hon. Members could make that claim, and a London mayor certainly could not do so in the absolute terms suggested in the context of a first-past-the-post electoral system.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam will expect me to say that the examples in the Electoral Reform Society document aim to prove a point. I was touched by his naivety when he said, "They are in the pamphlet, so they must be true." That is like saying that something is true because a lawyer said so. If that is the hon. Gentleman's experience, I would like the name of his lawyer. It simply does not follow.

The system outlined in the Bill is the most appropriate and the arguments advanced by the PR anoraks do not stand up. We are told that the system is dreadful because a candidate with a low number of votes could win, as occurred in the worked example in the ERS document. However, nothing was said about that last night when the Liberal Democrats mentioned the single transferable vote—it is their pure flame. It consistently results in more and more Johnny-last-in candidates in terms of the Teachta Dala in Ireland. Such candidates hang on by dribbles of preferences and never get anywhere near a significant amount of the vote, especially in five-candidate constituencies. They get elected simply because they are the last ones standing—and there is nothing democratic about that. So the Liberal Democrats' "pure" system is completely impure as well.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) said earlier—I was going to intervene but it was not worth it—the Electoral Reform Society makes it clear that the supplementary vote plus system is the same in Alabama and Sri Lanka. That is what it says in the document, so my hon. Friend's valid points stand in relation to both examples. It does not prove anything to ask, "But what about Alabama?". If the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam does not believe me, he should take up the matter with the Electoral Reform Society. It says clearly in its introduction that Alabama and Sri Lanka have the same supplementary vote modified system. Therefore, the hon. Gentleman's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington does not make the hon. Gentleman's case.

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Burstow *rose—*

Mr. McNulty: I shall give way first to the new Liberal Democrat leader.

Mr. Hughes: The Electoral Reform Society is in my constituency, so I must defend it. It says in the document that the Alabama system is no longer used, and cites the example of the winner who had 29 per cent. of the vote. I accept the assertion by the hon. Member for Workington that the situation is not quite the same in Sri Lanka because there are three people in the final count between whom the votes are transferred. However, the issue is the same: should we allow the accumulation of the preferences of all those who vote? Under that system, we could get nearer to a plurality of votes for one candidate. Under the Government's proposed system— *[Interruption.]*

6.15 pm

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Mr. McNulty.

Mr. McNulty: As hon. Members have said, the Electoral Reform Society document refers to the 1926 gubernatorial primary in Alabama when the winning candidate got 29 per cent. of the first and second choice votes. I fully accept that. It then defies the argument that the supplementary vote systems are different in Sri Lanka and Alabama by saying:

"A similar version of the system has been used since 1978 to elect the President of Sri Lanka."

The system is similar in terms of the supplementary vote variation, not in some other way. I hope that we shall return to the debate about STV, although it is not appropriate to do so now. I suppose that I shall have to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman over a cup of tea, which is a shame.

It is true that the system is similar to the French system—although we shall complete the process in one day. The Bill's key point is that we must break free of the mindset of fighting elections under the first-past-the-post system. I hope that all parties will fight the first election on the basis of not just "Support our candidate because we're the best" but also "Support so and so for second". Under this system, if political parties do their jobs correctly, they will tell the electors clearly what to do with their second preferences. It is not a case of candidates simply winning more than 50 per cent. of the vote. We must appreciate each of the different systems in that context. I suspect that we will face the same hurdles when we ask people to vote in their constituencies, but for different reasons.

[Mr. McNulty]

I do not understand the legitimacy of amendment No. 48, which fundamentally ignores—or at least misunderstands—the new architecture of London governance. In the event of a tie in an election for an executive position that is distinct from the assembly, the amendment seeks to give the assembly—which had nothing to do with that election—the power to choose the winner. The only justification for that position—we return to the naked self-interest of the Liberal Democrats wrapped in treacle, as I said last night—is that it is designed to reinstate Liberal amendments that have been rejected by the Committee. The Liberal Democrats want a proportionately elected assembly that will elect the mayor. That position profoundly misunderstands the relationship between the various elements of London's new government.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman has failed to tell the Committee what will happen if the Bill is not amended as we propose. The alternative is that a mayor of 7 million people will be chosen by drawing lots. My view of the hon. Gentleman's concept of democracy will diminish very rapidly if he is honestly claiming that the mayor of London should be chosen by drawing lots rather than by the votes of 25 elected members of the assembly.

Mr. McNulty: The hon. Gentleman again shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the relationship between the two elements. The two elections will not happen on the same day by coincidence. They are elections for different things taking place in different contexts. In the unlikely event of a draw in the mayoral election, I would rather draw lots than allow an assembly that has no democratic mandate regarding the election of the executive to choose the winner. The hon. Gentleman can giggle in his little anorak way all that he likes, but that is the reality of the situation. If two mayoral candidates each secured 3.5 million votes, I would rather see the winner chosen by drawing lots. Twenty-five assembly members who were elected to perform entirely different roles should not choose the winner. That may or may not reflect the credentials of the two remaining candidates in the race.

Mr. Hughes: We have considered inaccurate parallels with American elections. After the votes in US presidential elections have been added up, a second group—an electoral college—decides who should be President. I repeat that I cannot believe—I cannot believe that the hon. Gentleman believes—that Londoners would rather have a lottery and have a chance choice made between two people who got the same number of votes than that 25 other people to whom they have given a vote of confidence should choose who they thought was the appropriate person.

Mr. McNulty: That demonstrates that any claim—one was made soon after the general election—that the proposals simply copy a failed American model is wrong. Such a claim was made last night by a colleague who was sitting behind me but who is not here tonight.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey is wrong in one regard—the electoral college is the first, not the second stage in US presidential elections. That system does not work on the basis that if a popular, first-past-the-post vote is tied, the decision goes to an electoral college. In presidential elections, people vote for members of the electoral college. If that vote is tied, the decision goes—completely wrongly, in my opinion—to the legislature, rather than the executive. That fundamentally blurs, by accretion, democratic mandates.

We are discussing different parts of government in London. Flipping a coin is far preferable to another body, which has nothing to do with the executive in the democratic process, making that decision.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: I give way to the man with the retail store in Uxbridge.

Mr. Randall: The hon. Gentleman can repeat that any time he likes. Would he prefer the drawing of lots or the tossing of a coin? In other words, is he a drawer of lots or a tosser?

Mr. McNulty: That remark was well worth my allowing the hon. Gentleman to intervene and far preferable to all the interventions that I have just accepted from the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, who I would say, if I had to put money on it, does not draw lots.

The Bill has got the balance right in its proposals for electing the mayor. I have heard nothing of substance from the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk or the putative new leader of the Liberal Democrats that changes my mind. We should resist, as trivia borne by anoraks, all the amendments.

Mr. Wilkinson: I hope that I will be taken seriously in this debate if I confess that I am not a political anorak or an electoral system wonk and that, come election time, unlike Liberal Democrat Members, I do not wear sandals.

The further the Liberal Democrats get from power, the more keen they become on what the electorate would regard as jiggery-pokery with the figures and what in French or Euro-speak might be termed "repechage"—a blatant attempt to manipulate the electorate's clear decision.

The great merit of the amendments in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) is that the first-past-the-post system is readily comprehended. All the mayor needs to know is that he or she is chosen by the majority of Londoners. That is the key question. It is not a matter of second preferences. The mayor needs to be the person who receives the most wholehearted support from those who want him or her to be their mayor.

People often vote for second preferences without wishing them to be elected. I am sure that the Minister will advise the Committee whether, as I presume, it will be valid for voters only to make one choice. Many Londoners may do so. Will he advise the Committee also why the second preference votes for the candidates who are eliminated because they do not come first or second—or third, if there is a tie—should count more than the second preference votes cast for the candidates who come first or second? I do not comprehend the distinction that is being drawn.

The other point that we must clearly understand is that the electorate must have confidence in the system and must understand it. The best argument for the simple system that my colleagues propose was made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow). At the end of his speech, no one was any the wiser as to the merits of the amendment that he was supposed to be putting forward. The second-best argument came from the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), who, after 20 minutes, had not convinced the Committee of the inherent merits of the Bill's proposals. He has, rightly, fled. I doubt that anyone was convinced by his arguments.

I do not want to anticipate the debate that we might have on schedule 2, but if members of the electorate for London seeking guidance on the system for electing the mayor turned to that schedule, they would find it extremely complicated, whereas they comprehend fully that the candidate who wins the most votes most deserves to be elected.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman is making the point that the system is simple because people can understand that the candidate who gets the most votes should be the winner. However, does he accept that in many cases, particularly a mayoral election in which there might be three, four or five candidates, it is highly likely that, under first past the post, no candidate will win the support, in his words, of the majority of Londoners?

Mr. Wilkinson: It would be clear that more Londoners supported one candidate than any other. That is what matters. The gradations of second or third best are of no consequence because regardless of how people cast their second vote—and third vote, if they have one—their hearts will still be with their No. 1 choice. In our highly party political system, that first choice will, unless he is an independent candidate of exceptional merit, carry the same ideological convictions as the voter and be someone whom the voter regards as best suited to implementing the party political programme of the mayoralty, which will have been put to the electorate.

It is not valid to suggest that we shall get better governance, which will have more support from Londoners in general, from a system that could rely on second preferences. That will call into question the validity of the election system as a whole and diminish the electorate's interest in voting because they will find the system complicated and unconvincing. We need the maximum turnout for a system that everybody understands, that is traditional and that achieves the objective—the return of the person who has more support from Londoners than any other candidate.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I shall not detain the Committee for long. I apologise for not being present for the opening speech by the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), although I did, by electronic means, hear her describe the first-past-the-post system and refer to my description of the supplementary vote system as a superior majoritarian system. I shall briefly try to convince the Committee that the SV system is indeed superior to first past the post, which her party advocates, and, in those circumstances, to the alternative vote system that is supported by the smaller opposition party. Certainly first past the post would be greatly inferior in the current circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) summarised her speech as, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", to which the short answer is that the first-past-the-post system is broke. It would also be especially dangerous in the election for the mayor of London—the first executive election in these islands and quite different from any that preceded it.

6.30 pm

As I am sure that everyone who has spoken in the debate knows, the main failing of the first-past-the-post system is that it can result in the election of people on very low percentages of the vote. The hon. Member for the quaintly named constituency of Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) was elected by 31 per cent. of the voters, and Sir Russell Johnston the former hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber—another quaintly named constituency—was elected by only 26 per cent. under the present system, while his rivals received 25, 24 and 22 per cent. In other words, Members have been elected on less than a third of the vote in this Parliament and on only just over a quarter of the vote in recent elections.

Let us consider the lack of legitimacy that the system would give to a London mayor. We must also take on board the fact that, in a mayoral election, independents have a stronger chance and more people will be voting other than on political grounds. I should not advocate it, but experience in the United States suggests that name recognition will count for a great deal, independents can make a stronger showing, and business experience and other factors may be considered relevant in a way that they might not be in a legislative or council election.

There may be 10, 20 or 30 candidates, and five or 10 plausible candidates might get a share of the vote. I want to draw the Committee's attention to what happens under the first-past-the-post system in countries that have a plethora of candidates. The only country that has adopted first past the post—this supposedly superior system—since just after the second world war is Papua New Guinea. It started with the alternative vote but switched to the first-past-the-post system in the 1960s. I assure you that this is highly relevant, Mr. Martin.

Under the alternative vote system, candidates in Papua New Guinea had to appeal to voters along the lines of their splintered, tribal, village politics. The candidates had to find support across the country in order to get the 20 or 30 per cent. of the first choices that they had to have if they were to stand any chance of winning. When the country switched to first past the post, it reverted to the narrow politics that revolves around small villages. A candidate in Papua New Guinea is returned to Parliament on 6.5 per cent. of the vote, while the 15 or 20 other candidates get less.

I accept that there is not much correlation between an election in Papua New Guinea and a mayoral election in London except for the possibility that we may have a plethora of candidates, all plausible and all with some support, and we may well be pushed into having a mayor elected on 6.5 per cent. of the vote. It is clear that, in a mayoral election in which there may be many independent candidates, there is an overwhelming need for an electoral system that guides people to make a realistic choice between a small number of candidates rather than opening the way for an election that descends into farce.

There is nothing wrong with picking an electoral system that forces people to choose. At the end of the day, any choice of an executive boils down to a choice

[Mr. Martin Linton]

between two alternatives, and one is trying to get voters to think realistically about the alternatives. The supplementary vote, devised partly by my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), is exactly such a system. It forces people to think before the election who would make a good mayor and who it is worth spending one's vote on. A voter has only two votes and cannot choose any number of options. The process of narrowing the choice and the realistic alternatives is vital to the success of the mayoral elections.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East was quite wrong to say that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) was going to run for one dead-end job. In fact, he is having to choose between two possible dead-end jobs. One would be the Liberal Democrat candidate for the mayor of London and the other the leader of his party. Clearly, we need a system that will narrow the choice and thus force people in London to choose between realistic alternatives, without denying them the second choice that can avoid the difficulties of tactical voting.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk complained that voting under three different voting systems on the same ballot paper would cause confusion and difficulty, a point also made by some of her colleagues. Let us consider a possible ballot paper for the London vote on 4 May next year. While it may be true that experts would describe it as containing three different voting systems, to the voter there will be very little difference between the vote for the constituency representative, the London representative and the mayor.

The only instructions that need appear on the ballot paper are that one should put an X against the candidate that one supports for the constituency representative, an X for the party list or independent candidate that one supports in respect of the London representative, and an X for one's first and another for one's second choice of mayor. All three are X votes. Voting experts may say that they employ three different voting systems, but they will not appear so to the voters. Each system will involve simply putting one X or two. That is another reason why the supplementary voting system would be superior in this instance to the alternative vote. If the alternative vote were adopted for this election, we would have two elections by X votes and a third by preferential voting, which involves marking 1, 2 or 3 next to the candidates. The ballot paper will ask for three votes, all of which will be X votes. That is the enormous merit of the system over the two alternatives.

Mr. Edward Davey: I hope that the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) will not take offence if I say that, although some hon. Members have spoken about election system anoraks, he has proved that people who know about election systems can be quite entertaining. I congratulate him on his contribution. I was especially taken by his points about Papua New Guinea choosing first past the post. As I recall, Papua New Guinea was the only country that also opted for the poll tax while it had the first-past-the-post system. That again shows the demerits of that system.

An issue that has not been examined in enough detail is the type of post that we are electing. It is a new post. We have not had a mayor or a mayoral system before, which means that the way that we have thought about politics and elections probably needs to be reconsidered. The Government have gone some way towards that, but they have not opened their mind sufficiently to the implications of a mayoral system; nor do I detect that the Conservatives have applied their minds to the matter.

We are voting for one person, and the whole executive will be in that person's hands. The mayor will form a cabinet, but does not have to form one based on his or her support in the legislature. It is totally separate. The election of the mayor is about just one person, not that person's relationships with another party. That is why I believe that independents will stand.

If the process is about electing just one person, we need the electoral system to give as much legitimacy to that person as possible. That is where first past the post fails completely. The hon. Member for Battersea referred to a former Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament, Lord Russell-Johnston, who was elected on just 26 per cent. of the vote in 1992. That shows how the winning candidate from four or five candidates under first past the post would have very little legitimacy. On anyone's analysis, 26 per cent. of the vote cannot be considered full legitimacy.

The strength that is normally acknowledged of first past the post in general elections is that it gives a clear result, with no need for coalitions. I do not accept that argument for general elections, but, in elections for a mayor, it does not apply at all, because they involve the election of only one person. There is no question of forming a coalition—at least I do not think that one can form a coalition with oneself, unless one is schizophrenic. We would not suggest that Londoners would elect such a person. Therefore, first past the post is not appropriate for mayoral elections.

The Liberal Democrats have tabled amendments supporting the alternative vote primarily because it is the most suited to this type of election. The alternative vote will ensure that, whoever is elected, every Londoner's vote will count. Whoever wins, more than 50 per cent. of the people of London will have expressed some preference for them. That would surely enable them to govern London with much greater legitimacy than other options open to us.

Mr. Wilkinson: If the hon. Gentleman sets such store by the winner receiving the majority of the votes cast, would not a simpler and much more intelligible method be to stage a re-run, eliminating—perhaps—all but two candidates, rather like in French elections?

Mr. Davey: I think that I am beginning to win some support. The alternative vote achieves that automatically because it allows people to express their preferences. If the hon. Gentleman is concerned, as I am, about ensuring that the winning candidate has a majority, he must vote for our amendment. I invite him to join us in the Lobby.

During this sitting, we have heard some news that has affected my party particularly. I should like to draw to the Committee's attention the fact that not only do we table amendments in support of the alternative vote system for the election of one post, we employ the practice in our internal elections. The Liberal Democrat leader will be elected under the alternative vote system. That shows that we have faith in it—not because it happens to be in our

interests in the London elections, but because we believe that it is the fairest and most democratic system. We practise what we preach.

I know that the Labour party—I am not so sure that this applies to the Conservative party—employs the alternative vote system in its internal elections because it believes that that gives more legitimacy to the people whom its party members are electing. The Labour party does not have much faith in the supplementary vote system for its internal elections—nobody has ever told me that it uses such a system—so it is amazing that it has dreamt one up for London. Labour certainly does not practise what it preaches, although I suppose that we are used to that.

One argument against the alternative vote system—that, somehow it would be complex—must be tackled. The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) said that the first-past-the-post system had the merits of simplicity. He is insulting the people of London if he believes that they cannot decide first, second third fourth and fifth preferences. Is it really that difficult?

Labour Members suggested that such a system would confuse the electorate because people would be voting in a different way for assembly members. I find that insulting to the people of London, too. It is not difficult for people to put the numbers one to six into six boxes. That is one of the most simple things to do. The complexity is in the counting of votes. Although we would not deny that the system can be complex, computers and trained electoral adjudicators could ensure that there would be no problem. The key point is that the system would not pose any difficulty for the elector.

The hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) defended the supplementary vote system. I am not sure whether he will be known in future as Mr. Lottery or Mr. something else, following the suggestion by the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). In his so-called defence of SV, the hon. Member for Harrow, East gave no reasons. He did not answer the question why it would be the best choice for the election of mayor. Perhaps he will give his reasons during the clause stand part debate; we certainly hope so. We were unconvinced by his arguments, and remain convinced that our arguments for the alternative vote system are far superior.

6.45 pm

Mr. Brooke: I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) because I shall make one or two remarks about Liberal Democrat contributions to this debate.

I was taught by the late Alan Whitehorn, the father of Miss Katherine Whitehorn, the journalist. He would require us to translate Tennyson, psalms, hymns or Shakespeare into Latin or Greek verse. In prose, he would periodically ask us to translate something like our driving licences, in order to test whether we could embrace technical language as well. Speeches by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on the subject of proportional representation would have been quite a good candidate for the process that I have described. Although one must be uncertain about the outcome, the one thing of which one could be certain is that they would be neither Ciceronian nor Demosthenic.

I give the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam one piece of credit. He demonstrated that he could read out word for word a brief provided by the Electoral Reform Society. That same briefing was deployed last night by the Liberal Democrats in debates on the single transferable vote. I was struck on that occasion by the speech of the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), who has also spoken in this debate, who drew attention to the totally practical disadvantages of STV in Irish elections, to which the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) has alluded today. Those practical disadvantages did not, at least to my eye, appear in the Electoral Reform Society briefing. I do not remember it drawing our attention to the fact that the system did not work too well in Ireland.

Mr. Linton: The right hon. Gentleman might care to know that the Electoral Reform Society is precluded by its constitution from supporting any system other than the single transferable vote.

Mr. Brooke: The great thing about remaining in this House for a long time is that one learns something every day. Although I like to feel that there are one or two other advantages, that is certainly a prime one. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remark. To some extent, he has elided my next point: the arguments deployed seemed to be primarily academic and technical rather than practical.

I think that our electorate is the most mature in the world, and as a Londoner, a fortiori, I think that our electorate in London is the most mature in this country. Their virtue, and what gives them their maturity, is that their attitude to what we are about is essentially practical.

I confess that, in my salad days in this House, I once voted for proportional representation on one measure—an arcane fact that at least one political journalist has uncovered and revealed to me that he has done so and would, if necessary, hold it in evidence against me. In those days, I was of the view that, if PR was to have a future in this country, it needed to be tried out on the electoral foothills before anybody made an assault on the south col. Almost 22 years of sharing this Chamber with first Liberals and then Liberal Democrats has cured me of any enthusiasm for PR. If I were an adviser to the Liberal Democrat party, I would, in the sere and yellow of advancing age, give it the same advice that I cited a moment ago. I would also urge it, for the practical reasons that I gave a moment ago, too, that it should make its system as simple as possible. The speech that we had from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, in all its Sri Lankan and Alabaman complexity, demonstrated that, in terms of simplicity, the Liberals have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing.

Mr. Edward Davey: The right hon. Gentleman began his speech by extolling the virtues—including maturity—of the people of London. Surely he is not suggesting that, despite that maturity, they could not make their preferences in the order one, two, three, four, five.

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. My peroration is devoted to that subject, so if he will forgive me I will answer him then. You will be delighted to hear, Mr. Martin, that I shall come to my peroration very shortly.

In passing, I may be the most recent Member present to have visited Sri Lanka. We had a wholly admirable Sri Lankan driver, who told us that he had not voted in

[Mr. Brooke]

the last six presidential elections in Sri Lanka, but he then rather spoilt the effect, in the context of this speech, by saying that he was of so conservative a temperament that he would be happy if the British were to return. It just shows that London cab drivers are not the only ones in the world to play to their passengers guessed-at predilections.

However, the heart of this debate is the proposition in the opening speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) that the Government are asking us to tackle too many new voting systems at once. I do not share the views of the Scottish judge that a change for the better is a contradiction in terms, and I am not averse to experiment, but it is possible to have too much of a good thing, and it is possible to discredit that thing in the process. That is why I believe that the people of London will be better off staying with the system with which they are wholly familiar, and should not be asked to try a whole series of new systems simultaneously.

Mr. Raynsford: We have had a wide-ranging debate. We have done a veritable world tour, covering areas as far apart as Alabama, Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea, and now we return to London.

As the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) reminded us, the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) opened the debate by claiming that there were too many different voting systems. I have to accept that the Liberal Democrat party has given the impression that the debate is all about a plethora of voting systems, but the Government's proposals are not complex and detailed or prolific.

Last night we discussed, and decided on, voting arrangements for the assembly. Tonight we are considering the voting system for the mayor. We are not offering a range of voting systems; we are offering one simple voting system—the supplementary vote. The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk said that she wanted a mayor elected with a clear majority—not the least worst candidate. We agree whole-heartedly. That is why we do not support the Liberal Democrat advocacy of the alternative vote system, under which it would be possible for a mayoral candidate to be elected with very limited first preference support, simply on the basis of second, third, fourth, fifth and umpteenth preference votes from people who saw that candidate as the least worst on offer. That is not a good recipe for a mayor with a strong mandate to deliver effective government for London, and we reject the Liberal Democrat amendments proposing that system.

Mrs. Lait: We are discussing only the election of the mayor at the moment but, unless I am mistaken, on election day—4 May in the year 2000—Londoners will be confronted with three electoral systems in the polling station. Can the Minister assure me that the Government will fund education to promote awareness, and fund training for polling agents, presiding officers, electoral registration officers and so on, so that they are capable of dealing with the voter rage that is bound to follow, and so that they may have counselling afterwards for its effects?

Mr. Raynsford: Mr. Martin, I shall not risk incurring your wrath by straying into that territory, which is far from the subject of the amendment before us. The amendment is specifically about voting arrangements for the mayor—arrangements for people to vote on a single ballot paper, in the way that they do in elections for a Member of Parliament or councillors, and which will not involve additional costs or expenditure. We shall deal with those matters at the appropriate moment. I assure the hon. Lady that we shall make appropriate arrangements to ensure that the first election for the mayor and assembly of London can be handled efficiently, and that reasonable costs incurred by local authorities conducting those elections will be reimbursed through the normal and appropriate mechanisms. However, that is far from the subject of the debate.

The supplementary vote does not have the effect of the alternative vote, which could allow a candidate incapable of getting substantial support on a first preference vote to win. The supplementary vote ensures that only a candidate who can come in the top two on the first preference can go forward and, ultimately, win. It therefore ensures that the winning candidate must have a large measure of first-preference support.

The system has been discussed many times, and was recommended most recently by the Plant committee, established earlier in this decade—or perhaps toward the end of the last—with a very distinguished membership, including my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours).

Mr. Campbell-Savours *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Raynsford: I am wrong to say that my hon. Friend was a member of the committee; he submitted evidence to it, and the committee recognised the good sense of his evidence and recommended the supplementary vote system, which he had advocated. I pay tribute to his advocacy, for many years, of an electoral system that ensures the election of a candidate who commands substantial support, and which ensures that, in a situation such as a mayoral election for London, in which there may be many candidates, no candidate can win on the basis of very limited support, simply because of the wide spread of voting preferences. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) put it, it is a superior majoritarian system of voting. That is why we have adopted it.

Mr. Edward Davey: Can the Minister confirm that, under SV, the winning candidate may gain less than a majority of the votes of the people of London?

Mr. Raynsford: It is certainly possible that, under SV, the winning candidate will not secure 50 per cent. of the votes cast, because only the second preference votes of the defeated candidates—those not in the first two places—will be reallocated, and some of those votes may not be for candidates in the top two places. However, that does not in any way negate the value of the supplementary vote system. That system ensures that—as in France—only two candidates who have secured substantial support in the first preference vote can proceed to the second stage, so that only strong candidates with real backing are in the final run-off, and those are the two whose total votes, with the second preferences added, ultimately determine the outcome.

The amendments before us would change the method of election for mayor from that recommended by the Government. The Conservative amendments would restore a first-past-the-post system, requiring a simple majority. The Liberal Democrat amendments would replace the supplementary vote system with the alternative vote system. Neither proposition is acceptable to us. The White Paper clearly said that we had considered those alternative arrangements, and made it clear why we had rejected them in favour of the supplementary vote system.

The election of the first mayor of London will be the first time that we, in the United Kingdom, have a directly elected executive fulfilling a major responsibility such as that which the mayor of London will fulfil. In itself, that appears to us to call for a method of election the result of which attunes itself as closely as possible to the expressed views of the electorate, and which delivers to the candidate the strongest mandate possible. That is why we have proposed election by the supplementary vote system.

We want a strong mayor, with whom the people of London can identify, and whom the majority of those who vote will feel that they have had a say in choosing—if only by the use of the second vote. I am therefore unable to accept the Conservative or the Liberal Democrat amendments, which would change the electoral system for mayor. I invite the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) to withdraw their amendments.

Amendment No. 48, also tabled by the Liberal Democrats, is wrong and wrong-headed. The intended effect of the amendment is to allow the assembly to take a tie-breaking decision when two candidates for the office of mayor receive an exactly equal number of votes during the election. Such a situation is exceptionally unlikely. We are talking of an electorate of 5 million, and 5 million votes, or a proportion of them, cast between a range of candidates with first and second preferences is exceptionally unlikely to produce the situation that is suggested. However, irrespective of that, the amendment is wrong because it is technically defective. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), who introduced it, seems not to have read subsequent provisions in the Bill. If he had, he would know that clause 4(7) requires the returning officer to determine who has been elected as the mayor, and constituency assembly members, before the returning officer can decide who are the London members of the assembly. Therefore, after the first elections to the GLA an assembly will not exist until after the tie-breaking decision would need to be taken. As I have said, the situation that has been suggested could not happen. At the second and subsequent elections the decision would have to be taken not by the new assembly but by the outgoing assembly, and clearly that would be nonsensical.

7 pm

The amendment is wrong-headed because what is being proposed would allow a separately elected assembly, with a different mandate from that of the mayor, determining who should or should not be the mayor. It would make whichever candidate was chosen as the mayor beholden to the majority in the assembly for his or her office. That would fundamentally undermine the authority of the mayor and undermine the principle of the separation of powers that we intend to put in place for the new authority. Therefore, the assembly should not take such a tie-breaking decision. The decision should, as is the case in all other tied elections, including elections to membership of the House of Commons, be left to the random outcome of the drawing of lots. In these circumstances, I invite the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam to withdraw the amendment.

The Government's proposal for the supplementary vote is an important and innovative system of election that is entirely appropriate to the innovative system of government that we are proposing for London. It will ensure the election of a mayor with a strong mandate who is able to represent the people of London confidently and to fulfil the serious responsibilities which we are giving to the post. I urge right hon. and hon. Members who have moved amendments to withdraw them. If not, I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote for the Government's position and to reject the amendments.

Mr. Burstow: It has been a useful and interesting debate. Having listened to the comments of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), I shall take away his comments, reflect on my earlier contribution and endeavour at a later stage, perhaps, to adopt a more plain English approach to the presentation of electoral systems.

The debate has focused on first past the post, the supplementary vote and the alternative vote, and because of that the issues become very confusing. I think that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have perhaps demonstrated that quite ably this evening. As the Committee knows, our proposal is that there should be the alternative vote. We would wish to return to the matter on Report and therefore we shall not be pressing the amendments on the alternative vote now.

We feel that given the Minister's remarks about a tied vote for the mayor and the technicality of the relevant amendments, it would be appropriate for us further to consider them. However, we are not convinced by the Minister's arguments. We feel strongly that the issue should not be decided on the toss of a coin. We believe that we need a simple and fair voting system that maximises support for the mayor and allows genuine and full choice for the voter.

Mrs. Shephard: It has been a wide-ranging debate. We do not normally travel from New Guinea via Sri Lanka and Alabama back to London. Nor are we dragged to and fro between 1926 and the present day.

The debate has stimulated the Liberal Democrats to crown their achievements of yesterday, when they proposed no fewer than four electoral systems for the assembly, by proposing a completely incomprehensible system, which has been described by the Minister as such, for the election of mayor.

The debate has also stimulated the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) to continue his barrage of surely undeserved insults against the Liberal Democrats, accusing them of an anorak tendency while demonstrating certainly his growing credentials to be a trainspotter. We have had a customary erudite contribution from the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), who might prefer to be known as a superior majoritarian given that he is clearly an expert in that particular system.

We have had sound sense and elegant erudition from my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) and my right hon. Friend the Member

[Mrs. Shephard]

for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). We have had customary urbane reassurances from the Minister, who is very far from being either an anorak or a trainspotter.

The point of the debate is how to achieve a clear and comprehensible system for the assembly and the mayor of London against the background of the great changes to the governance of London that are set out in the Bill. The Minister has made it clear that he cannot accept our amendments. We believe that his stance is mistaken. We believe also that the clarity that we seek can be achieved only by a first-past-the-post system of election both for the assembly and for mayor. We therefore seek to divide the Committee on amendments Nos. 8, 9, 10 and 11.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 131, Noes 335.

Division No. 41] **[7.6 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Lull, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir David Madel and
Mrs. Caroline Spelman.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna

Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew (St Ives)
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malialieu, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rayneford, Nick
Read, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman: I call Mr. Davey. The hon. Gentleman must be quick.

Mr. Edward Davey: I will be quick. I merely want to put it on record that the Liberal Democrats oppose the clause standing part of the Bill, for the simple reason that the Government have not argued their case strongly enough for the supplementary vote system. In reply to my intervention, the Minister made it clear that that would not ensure that a majority of Londoners had voted for the winning mayor—

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): Person.

Mr. Davey: Person. I thank the hon. Gentleman. Only our proposed system would ensure that the majority had voted for the winning woman or man. As I said, we are opposed to including the clause in the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman: I should tell the hon. Gentleman that I did not mean that his speech should be quick, but that, when I am proposing the Question, he should be quick in getting to his feet.

Mr. Ottaway: Any clause containing an election method for the London assembly that enshrines a method of proportional representation is unacceptable to Conservative Members. We shall divide the Committee on it.

Ms Glenda Jackson: Mr. Martin, you performed a service to the Committee by urging the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) to get to his feet rapidly, as his speech was kept short. He and other Liberal Democrat Members have been making their arguments on the voting issue, but, ultimately, the issue will come down to numbers. Today, although he argued that the Government failed to argue our case sufficiently strongly, the Division numbers clearly show that we have won the argument.

I tell the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) that I quite understand his discomfiture. The official Opposition's arguments on the issue—which was debated in no small detail—also failed to convince the Committee, which comprehensively rejected the official Opposition's amendment.

The Committee has had a protracted debate on the systems to be used to elect a mayor and an assembly. I do not propose to re-open the issues in this stand part debate.

Our debates have had the benefit of the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), for Battersea (Mr. Linton) and for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours)—each of whom, in his own way, is an expert on the matter. As the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) said, my hon. Friends took us to New Guinea, Alabama, Sri Lanka and back to London.

As my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction said in replying to the previous debate, our proposals for the voting system for both mayor and the assembly are important and innovative. That is what Londoners voted for in the referendum, and it is what the Government shall deliver.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 289, Noes 154.

Division No. 42] **[7.22 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Colley, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malliaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra

Palmer, Dr Nick
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir David Madel and
Mrs. Caroline Spelman.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2

VOTING AT ELECTIONS

Mr. Ottaway: I beg to move amendment No. 83, in page 143, line 27, at end insert

'no later than 55 days prior to the date set for the ordinary election'.

This is a probing amendment. Schedule 2 provides that lists of London member candidates must be submitted by the registered political parties, but there is no time scale. We want to ascertain the Minister's thinking on that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kate Hoey): The amendment would set for parties wishing to field candidates in the elections

[Kate Hoey]

for London wide members a limit of 55 days before the assembly elections to submit their lists to the Greater London returning officer.

The amendment is unnecessary and impractical. The time limits for the close of nominations in elections are normally laid down in secondary legislation, but the amendment would put a time limit in the Bill, which we believe would be an unnecessary constraint.

If the normal time limits for local elections are used for the assembly elections, the last day for nominations under our proposal would be the 19th day before the date of the poll, excluding weekends and public holidays. For an election on 4 May 2000, nominations would have to be in on or around 31 March—about five weeks before polling day. We see no need to extend the campaign further, and electors will have every opportunity to get to know who are the candidates on a particular party list.

The amendment could mean that nominations for London wide seats might close at a different time from nominations for constituency seats and mayor. The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) would agree that that would be nonsense, because half the campaign would be under way and half the candidates would still be undeclared. He would also agree, after listening to my remarks, that there is no need for the amendment. There is no reason why we should not keep the normal time limits for local elections.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I welcome the Minister, who is my parliamentary neighbour, to our debate. I am tempted to say that her arguments are persuasive; this is not an issue that we have decided is a great cause to fight. There is logic in having a similar date, and there is certainly logic in not extending the formal campaign. No one who has been through an election campaign would want a six-week formal campaign instead of a three-week campaign. The pre-campaign will be bad enough without the formal campaign being elongated.

It is perfectly proper for the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) to table a probing amendment, and we should reflect on what the Minister has said. If we need to, we can return to the matter. Ideally, the list would be published on the closing date for individual candidacies for constituencies, if we are to have the system proposed by the Government.

Mr. Ottaway: I am grateful for the Minister's reply. Under the circumstances, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Ottaway: I beg to move amendment No. 58, in page 144, leave out lines 25 to 37.

The amendment would remove the artificial 5 per cent. threshold, which any candidate seeking to be elected to the assembly by the list system has to surmount. There are many political views in this country that we disagree with, many that we find unacceptable and, on rare occasions, views that we find repugnant. Politicians of the left, the right and the centre usually find common cause in fighting and resisting the policies of the extreme right and the extreme left. We do so because we choose to, and because we are committed to the political process, but we are also committed to the democratic process.

Everyone has views, particularly Members of Parliament, and we exercise our democratic right to express those views. One had only to go outside the House into Parliament square this afternoon to see demonstrators from Chile expressing their views for and against General Pinochet. Nowhere is the opportunity to express one's views in a civilised way more enshrined in tradition and culture than in this country. One of the most enjoyable ways of spending a Sunday afternoon is to go to Speakers' Corner, where the wide variety of views expressed range from the extreme to the eccentric.

That commitment to democracy led us to table the amendment. The rationale behind it is straightforward and simple: if 4 per cent. of Londoners express support for a candidate and if, under normal circumstances, that is sufficient for him or her to join the assembly, it is right, proper and democratic for that 4 per cent. to have their voice heard on the assembly.

However, under the system that the Government propose for the assembly—devised, I understand by a Mr. d'Hondt—any party standing for the London assembly will need at least 3.8 per cent. of the vote to get one of its members on to the assembly and, under extreme circumstances, that figure could drop as low as 2.8 per cent. Thus we are debating the difference between 2.8 per cent. and 5 per cent. Conservative Members would far rather accept the natural threshold than the arbitrary imposition of an extra 2.2 per cent. Why is someone's view unacceptable if 3 per cent. vote for him, but acceptable if 5 per cent. do so?

The moral for the Government is that one cannot just pick and choose with the electoral system. If they do not like the consequences of proportional representation, they should not introduce it in the first place. The Conservative party is fundamentally opposed to the principle of PR. It produces weak, divisive Governments and assemblies, and severs the link with constituencies which we regard as important. Israel is experiencing a nightmare situation, with religious groups with low percentages of support holding the balance of power to the country's detriment.

7.45 pm

It is all very well for the Government to have thresholds when it suits them. They had no threshold in the referendum for London and they had no such artificial threshold in Scotland or Wales. They should not have a threshold in London just because they might disagree with someone's political views. This matter goes to the core of democracy. If the Government cannot stand the heat, they should get out of the kitchen.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am grateful for the opportunity to have this important debate. Those of us who have been involved in London politics for a long time understand its significance. It will be the last substantive debate on the Bill and I hope that the Committee will excuse me if I take a few minutes to outline the issues.

May I make it clear that the Bill proposes that the Secretary of State should have the power to prescribe a threshold—a percentage of the vote that a party needs to surpass in order to be elected—and that the maximum threshold would be 5 per cent.? I remember hearing a perfectly reasonable response from the Secretary of State, whose good faith I do not doubt. He said that he would consult widely on the matter before determining his view.

My colleagues and I propose to vote against the schedule tonight because, at this stage, we do not want to concede that the discretion should be left in the hands of the Secretary of State, nor do we want to jump to the conclusion that, for the first time in Britain, a threshold will be set at 5 per cent., which is what will happen if we leave the schedule in the Bill.

There are two main issues. The first is, how do we accommodate smaller, perfectly democratic parties?

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): Like the hon. Gentleman's.

Mr. Hughes: No, not like ours. Ours is a large party, although it is perfectly good and democratic. Indeed, it is a much older party than the hon. Gentleman's.

This is a relatively easy issue. The obvious party to mention is the Green party, which has made a good contribution to British politics and to many of the political systems in the European Union and beyond. It has an interest in the outcome of this debate and would agree with the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) that, if there is to be a threshold, it should be the natural threshold, which works out at 3.8 per cent.

Those who, unlike the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), have not received the briefing or done the work, might ask why the natural threshold is 3.8 per cent. I thought about it and calculated that, if there were 25 members, the threshold would be 4 per cent. However, 25 members plus one are needed for the counting, so 3.8 is the threshold. My gut reaction on the general question of a threshold for the assembly is that we should have the natural threshold. The weakness in that argument is that the threshold is determined by the size of the assembly, which is in a sense arbitrary. I understand that.

Let me be absolutely honest: if we have a bigger assembly, as we propose, with 40 members, the threshold will be smaller. To get one seat out of 40 requires a threshold of 2.8 per cent. There is therefore no definite point at which the threshold is right.

The second issue is whether a top threshold of 5 per cent. should be set. Britain has never had a threshold before, so it is a new experience for us and it is perfectly proper that we should debate it. It would require a persuasive argument to raise the threshold from its natural level.

As I have said, I am no great expert in this matter, although I have an interest in electoral systems. I should like to cite four examples: New Zealand and Germany have a 5 per cent. threshold—I am well aware that Germany has had a threshold for a long time as it is a legacy of the post-war settlement, imposed on it by this country as part of its redemocratisation and to avoid a repeat of what happened in the 1920s; Italy has a 3 per cent. threshold; and Israel has a threshold of between 2 and 3 per cent. Thus there is a range of thresholds in other perfectly reputable modern democracies.

Mr. Linton: I challenge the hon. Gentleman's assertion that Britain has never before experienced a threshold in its voting system. Although we have never experienced an explicit voting system, the Opposition recommend that we accept the natural threshold of 3.8 per cent. We had a natural threshold in our voting system throughout the 19th century when, in all seats other than those in Ireland, there were only two candidates in practically every election. There was therefore a natural threshold of 49.9 per cent. During most of this century we have had three-cornered contests, so the threshold has been 33 per cent. Our system does include a threshold, so it is odd that the Opposition argue against one.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman's point is relevant to the wider debate, although it is not as relevant to recent history. I thought that he was going to give the example of Northern Ireland. It is true that Northern Ireland has a natural threshold, because it has had a single transferable vote system for a long time, but Great Britain does not.

We have never had a prescribed threshold, nor has the Secretary of State had the power to determine a threshold. I am troubled about the prescribed threshold, because it is arbitrary—a 5 per cent. maximum is arbitrary. Even if the Secretary of State acts in good faith, the power would be on the statute book and could be varied by order at a later date.

The Neill committee, and the Nolan committee before it, recommended that such electoral matters should go before an electoral commission. The Government have accepted that for Scotland, and there is such a proposal for the House of Lords. My instinct is that the matter of whether we have a threshold and what it should be must be referred to someone who does not have a party political view and does not have a party vested interest—a point that the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) made in debates on other amendments. I am making the point in a non-oppositional way.

The threshold will be set by a Labour Secretary of State, who will assess what will be the right threshold for the elections to be held next year. It will make a big difference to the Green party whether the threshold is 5, 4, 3, 2 or 1 per cent. It could determine whether Labour has a majority in the assembly. In the general election, Labour got 49 per cent. of the votes cast in London, so it almost had a majority. If that were replicated, a decision on the threshold could determine whether Labour would get a majority on the assembly. That is a hugely political matter.

Whatever advice the Secretary of State takes—the Callaghan Administration rejected the boundary commission recommendations at the end of the 1974–79 Government—he may make a much-criticised decision that is alleged to be party politically driven. We should avoid that. I ask Ministers to subject the matter to independent assessment before they make a proposition, so that it is out of the party political domain.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: Will the hon. Gentleman express his personal opinion about whether the Government are taking a cynical approach to deciding the threshold for party political advantage or whether their approach is a genuine attempt to ensure that extremist parties have no place in a London assembly?

Mr. Hughes: I am coming to that point and, in that sense, the hon. Gentleman and I come from the same political part of London. I hope that the hon. Gentleman heard me when I said that I respect the good faith of the Secretary of State. I do not doubt that the Government want to deal with that issue, and they would be criticised if they did not do so. I am not suggesting that they are

[Mr. Hughes]

trying to gain party political advantage. I am making the point that if the House gives any Minister of any Government the power to make the choice, his choice, given he is a political animal, will be affected by the political factor. The choice of a 2, 3 or 4 per cent. threshold could determine whether the Green party got a seat, and that could determine whether the Labour party had a majority.

I want to address the question of how we deal with non-democratic, right-wing, illiberal, extremist and fascist parties. In every parliamentary election that I have fought in the docks and in the east end of London, I have had right-wing, racist opponents. I am happy to say that, without any thresholds, we have taken them on and seen them off. Over the years, the one thing that has united all three of the main political parties in my seat is the fact that, between us, we have been able to keep the vote for right-wing parties as low as possible, and in spite of expectations, they have never achieved more than about 2 per cent. I regard that as very important.

What dangers do we see coming down the track from the right-wing parties? Philosophically, being a purist, I would prefer to start with a natural threshold, but I concede that we should not reject a prescribed threshold out of hand. There is a danger that, with 14 seats and a list system, extremists could whip up a right-wing agenda and get people out to vote for a right-wing party when they otherwise would not have done so.

A racist candidate knows that he cannot win in the seat of the Minister for Transport in London or in the seat of my friend and neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). In a first-past-the-post system he will never get more than a few per cent. of the vote, but he takes part to incite racist views. Thank God, the right wing has only ever won one election, which was in Millwall a few years ago. The problem was rapidly dealt with, for which I pay tribute to the Labour party. The Secretary of State for Health and the Minister for London and Construction played a large part in that, and I pay tribute to them unreservedly. I would rather a thousand times that Labour won every seat in Tower Hamlets or anywhere else, than any of the right-wing parties. It would be unacceptable if right-wing parties were to win seats.

A list system makes a difference. I am concerned that if we present to people the prospect of an extreme right-wing candidate being elected with 3.8 per cent. of votes cast, it may act as an incentive. They may think that they will get a right-wing candidate elected, whereas post-war electoral history shows that extreme right-wing parties have done badly in London—I put aside the rest of the country.

We should not be simplistic about the past. The figures for the average votes cast across London for the British National party or the National Front show that they have done badly in the past, but their candidates have not stood in most seats. They have stood in only a few seats, so the figures give a false average. They have got a higher percentage of votes in the seats for which they have stood. It is still only about 1 per cent., so we must be careful not to award them a bigger influence or political importance than they have. Under the legislation, members of those parties will be able to stand as candidates for the assembly. Past voting figures are not a good comparison, because there has never been a slate of right-wing candidates.

We share the Government's view that if the assembly is to represent London and if black people, Asians, Africans, Caribbean people and people of all backgrounds, races, creeds, colours and characteristics are to feel part of the electoral process and to be encouraged to take part in it, we must ensure that they are not subject to harassment, intimidation or political annihilation by people who have a dogmatic, undemocratic and racist agenda.

I am sympathetic to the idea of a threshold, but I am unsympathetic to the proposal that it should be decided by the Secretary of State, however ethically aware and eminent he may be. I am unsympathetic to the idea that we should today, without any further debate among colleagues whose views we have not heard, decide that it should be no higher than 5 per cent. and that that is the absolute, because that figure has been plucked out of the air.

I hope that, however we vote, hon. Members will agree that there should not be a "take it or leave it" conclusion—that the Government should not say "We have thought about this, and therefore we are absolutely right." They may be right, but we nevertheless need to have the debate. Let me make an offer to the Minister for Transport in London, whose credibility in this regard I have no reservations about endorsing. Ultimately, I should prefer an agreement to be reached between conventional, democratic, proper political parties, in relation to "green" parties but also in relation to how we deal with right-wing, racist, anti-democratic parties. If the outcome of this debate is Ministers' being able to say, "We are happy to get the best objective answers to these questions", it will be very welcome.

8 pm

We support the removal of the provision from the Bill for the moment, but that should not be interpreted as opposition to a debate or a threshold. We need consensus. I am sure that the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) and for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), who represent the borough opposite mine across the Thames and who have had experience of such issues, agree that is better for democracy. We have a common interest in securing the best possible democratic traditions. We all want to ensure that people who are bigoted, prejudiced and racist—people of whom I have been a victim when, as an MP, I have taken them on—are put on the margins of politics and never obtain a toehold in this country, as they have in some of our neighbouring countries across the channel.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: Let me say immediately that I respect the views expressed by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), and do not for a moment question the integrity of the Liberal Democrats.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the racism that is endemic in a minority of the east London community. As I have said, I respect his party's integrity. The hon. Gentleman knows, as I do, that the British National party won a by-election on the Isle of Dogs in 1993, partly because of policies employed by the Liberals in Tower Hamlets. Those policies were condemned not just by the Commission for Racial Equality and by hon. Members on

both sides of the House, but by the High Court, as being racist in their application to housing. In the climate that was created, the BNP was able to exploit antagonism in impoverished communities in relation to unemployment, housing problems, overcrowding and all the difficulties that the hon. Gentleman and I experience in Southwark and Tower Hamlets.

I commend the Liberal Democrats for taking action. Let me make a belated suggestion. I know that members of the hon. Gentleman's party, including him, wanted disciplinary action to be taken against elements in Tower Hamlets. Friends of mine in the party argued for some time that it had been hijacked, and I do not for a second suggest that the responsibility lies directly with the hon. Gentleman or his party, but there is some culpability. Extremists of the right will try to infiltrate all political parties to pursue their own advantage.

In 1993, the BNP won a by-election on a first-past-the-post basis, gaining nearly 1,600 votes and beating Labour by seven. We employed our resources massively to win back the seat, doubling our vote to 3,000; but the BNP increased its vote to 2,000. I speak as one who represents part of Tower Hamlets and part of Newham—an inner-city east London seat with a multi-cultural population, like those of the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King). My point is that, as it is easy for racists to play the racist card when it comes to poverty, overcrowding and homelessness, we should introduce artificial requirements to ensure that the racists have no platform.

In the GLC elections of 1977, the National Front scored 19 per cent. In that context, a 5 per cent. threshold would be meaningless. I want to engender a multi-cultural London and to promote the diversity and richness that already exists. In a democratic society, there is no place for people who say, "You do not have a right to live. You do not have a right to a job. You do not have a right to live here, in dignity and with respect." We need thresholds of decency. I see this as nothing other than a genuine attempt by those who are concerned for society to make it clear that there is no place in that society for racism. I accept that many views exist about political theology, ideology and philosophy, but there can be no place for those who take a discriminatory or prejudiced approach to people because of the colour of their skin, their race, their sexuality or their religious origin.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman is saying, but, so that people do not receive an unhelpful false impression, will he confirm that the 19 per cent. figure that he gave for the 1977 election was not—thank God—the London-wide figure, but was only a local figure? Nothing approaching 10 per cent. has ever been achieved across London.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: I thank the hon. Gentleman for correcting me.

We have seen what can be conjured up. In France, the National Front and Jean-Marie le Pen command a respectable number of votes. Thank goodness for the winning team in the French world cup, which was multi-cultural. Zinedine Zidane scored goals in the final. If anything cheered anti-racists throughout the world, it was the French winning the world cup. I have no hesitation in saying that, in a Parliament dominated by English Members. They may not be the greatest lovers of French culture, but, as an expatriate Scot, I do not have the same difficulty.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): When we discuss the election of one local councillor, should we not bear in mind that in 1981 Jean-Marie le Pen managed to secure the election of only one local councillor, but 10 years later there were 1,000 in France? It takes only one to provide the electoral credibility that can start the process. That is why it is so important for the Government to provide for a 5 per cent. threshold.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: The bottom line is that fascism is not about democracy, about respect for the 5 per cent. threshold or about respect for humanity or individuals. The BNP and the National Front will put on an electoral facade in order to con people. They will say, "We are looking after white interests." But we know that, as soon as they have been beaten in the ballot boxes, they will take to the streets. They will continue to perpetrate violence against black people, and people who do not agree with them—against political opponents like all of us in the Chamber.

There is no place for racism, extremism or fascism in our society. There is no disagreement about that. That is why Labour Members wholeheartedly support the Government's threshold, which we see as a message or symbol. We have read about the Lawrence inquiry, and we know what is happening in society. We are determined to create dignity and decency, and we must convey that message.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow has said, if we give such people an inch they will take a mile; so we must give them nothing. We must give them no space in which to breathe, or to peddle their propaganda. We must prosecute them whenever possible when they express their views in writing, and we must not give them space in which to operate as a political organisation. We have learnt the lessons of history, from Germany and elsewhere. Such people must not be given a toehold.

I respectfully suggest to Conservative Members that, although a 5 per cent. threshold introduces an artificial obstacle to democracy, democracy itself is too precious for us to give such people the air to breathe. This is a small step towards depriving them of their platform.

Mr. Wilkinson: I admire the moral conviction of the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), but I cannot share his conclusions; rationally, they do not stand up. I wholeheartedly support amendment No. 58 and, on this occasion, we have support from the Liberal Democrats.

As I said at the outset, there is, as Kenneth Starr might have observed, a pattern of behaviour emerging. Clause 3 contains the power for the Secretary of State to dictate the timing of the second and third elections to the Greater London authority. In schedule 1, which we did not debate, the Secretary of State has the power to decide when a boundary commission should examine constituency boundaries. Now, in schedule 2, the Secretary of State will have the power, if the schedule is passed unamended, to decide whether the threshold should be above the natural one, under the d'Hondt formula, of some 3.8 per cent., up to a limit of 5 per cent.

[Mr. Wilkinson]

It is surely for us to decide what the threshold should be during the passage of the legislation. I concur wholeheartedly with the judgment of my hon. Friends that it should be the natural threshold. If the d'Hondt formula has any merit—it has little—it is that it does at least set a natural threshold that eliminates the possibility of, I will not say rogue candidates, but not serious candidates, who have minimal support, being returned to office.

I caution the House against artificially limiting the accession to the assembly, by diktat of the Secretary of State, of representatives of political parties that the Government may not support and the objectives of which they may not share. To do so is fundamentally undemocratic. It is for the electorate to decide who their representatives should be.

If the electorate votes in sufficient quantities normally—that is, without such interference—to secure representation, they should be permitted that representation. If they are not, frustration results and the likelihood is greater, rather than less, that those who are denied representation will pursue anti-democratic, perhaps violent means to achieve their political objectives.

We have seen with the proscription of Sinn Fein and other parties that such proscriptions are unwise. Setting an artificially low threshold will not have the result that the parties on the Government Benches desire.

Mr. Linton: Will the hon. Gentleman explain how it can be fundamentally undemocratic to support a threshold of 5 per cent. if he supports a system that has an implied threshold of at least 30 per cent.?

Mr. Wilkinson: I do not support any artificial threshold. I just happen to feel that the person who secures the most votes in any particular electoral area should be returned, however many people vote for him or for her. As I have said, it is not a matter for such jiggery-pokery.

In my political career, I have seen people putting up supposedly hopeless causes. When I was first elected in Bradford, a representative of the Pakistan People's party stood in the Manningham ward in Bradford, West. It may have seemed totally illogical, but, at that time, to the Pakistanis, it seemed the right thing to do. No doubt Mr. Bhutto was pleased that they had a candidate, but that is beside the point. The lesson to be drawn was that the Pakistanis felt that a PPP candidate would have represented their interests best. Had he been elected, be it by 30 per cent., as the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) suggests could have occurred, I would have accepted that result.

8.15 pm

Who are we to decide which party or affiliation is unworthy of election? The hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town cites the National Front. The Front-Bench team of the Labour party might suggest old Labour in certain circumstances, the Socialist Workers party or goodness knows who else. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) argued, the Greens might be denied an office that, without such interference, would properly be theirs; so might supposedly racial parties.

In part of the east end, it could be a Bangladeshi candidate; people in that area might feel that a Bangladeshi was right. In Brent, it could be a Gujarati, or, in Southall, a Sikh. One does not want London to polarise on such racial lines, but, in certain circumstances, it might be better that there should be the possibility of such racial representation than that it should be artificially denied.

The schedule as drafted demonstrates yet again the determination of Her Majesty's Government to proscribe, to interfere and not to allow the House to make its judgments. That is wrong. Electoral arrangements should be made here rather than by the Secretary of State or the commission, because commissions tend to be appointed by Her Majesty's Ministers.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I do not think that I was suggesting that we delegate the power to the commission. I was suggesting that we delegate the power to make the recommendation to a body such as that, but that it comes back to this place—Parliament—to make the decision on the basis of that advice.

Mr. Wilkinson: Of course. The hon. Gentleman is right. I was not following his remarks accurately enough in drawing the interpretation that I did, but I was thinking, for example, of other commissions that are told to do things on our behalf, such as the one on which Lord Wakeham will serve. I tend to misjudge commissions because they tend to be packed with people who will offer the advice that Her Majesty's Ministers seek.

I welcome the fact that, on the issue of thresholds, if on few others, there is genuinely bipartisan agreement between my party and the Liberal Democrats. We are right. We should stick to the natural threshold of 3.8 per cent. under the d'Hondt formula.

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are grateful for the opportunity that the amendment has afforded the House to discuss an important and serious issue. At present, the Bill provides for the Secretary of State to have power to set a threshold of not more than 5 per cent. of the vote which a party or independent candidate would have to attain in order to win a London-wide assembly seat. We are under no illusions and we would regard it as grossly irresponsible if we did not listen and continue to listen to what the House says, and welcome and ask for views on what we propose.

If the Bill is passed, it would be the first time that such a threshold has been set. We acknowledge that the reason why we have made the proposal is because we are presenting a unique electoral system in London. It will be the first time that the systems are being used to create this type of authority and city-wide government, and the city is, as virtually every Member has pointed out, multi-racial.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) spoke of normal thresholds. Our proposals are ones that the people of London have agreed should be put in place. We are ensuring that the rest of the Bill goes through here. The Government's proposals have been overwhelmingly voted for in the two days of debate. But it is undoubtedly the case that, in certain constituencies, and in certain circumstances with many parties and, in some instances, individual candidates,

those systems might result in a highly proportional result. Someone could be elected on less than 3 per cent., rather than what I am perfectly prepared to acknowledge to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood has been said to be the normal threshold of 3.85 per cent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) made a particularly passionate yet reasoned speech, speaking, as he does, for a multi-cultural constituency. He said, and I agree, that there should be no place in the House for those who represent racism, fascism or extremist views of any kind. There is, should, and must continue to be a clear message from the House that we would fight those who would use such arguments to return themselves to this place, and in particular, to what we are proposing as a city-wide government for London.

This House is a torch for democracy, and has been for all its history, but there have been too many examples in the quite recent past of an unwillingness to counter immediately the forces of extremism, and we have seen them take over.

Mr. Wilkinson: I in no sense belittle the ethical impetus which drives the Minister's arguments. But, quite candidly, we should fight evil forces of every kind in politics on the hustings and in every way possible in all our activities. But if a representative of the Marxist-Leninist fringe faction, or some racist party, secures the requisite number of votes by any natural system, be it d'Hondt or any other, we should respect the view of the electorate and try to counter the arguments of that person once duly elected.

Ms Jackson: I respect the hon. Gentleman's opinion, but I cannot in all honesty accept his argument. I have touched on the point that he has made with regard to normal thresholds and how they, in the unique system that we are putting in place for the first time in Britain to produce a unique form of city government, could, as I have had occasion to say, enable extremist parties to be elected with less than 3 per cent. of the vote.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town highlighted the kind of increase that there was in extremist parties in Millwall, even under the first-past-the-post system when parties were united in contesting those candidates. I repeat that the Government are proposing a unique form of city-wide government, but one which affords the opportunity for a genuinely representative, multi-racial, gender-balanced assembly, where small parties can be returned. Because of the dangers that we have experienced in the past and the potential for such dangers in the future, the Secretary of State should have the power to set a threshold.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), in his opening contribution, referred to what he regards as the iniquities of any form of electoral system other than first past the post. He described the detrimental impact of such a system in Israel. He failed to touch on the fact that Germany has had a form of proportional representation. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) pointed out, the threshold there was imposed by the allies after the second world war, precisely to ensure that there would not be a rise of fascist and extremist parties.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey also referred to parties such as the Greens, and the fact that, in some instances, a normal threshold would impact against their being returned. No one is arguing that the Green party is extremist. I well remember the European elections when the Greens polled more than 4 million votes but, under that system, could return no Member to the European Parliament. That is slightly outside tonight's debate, because our electoral system for this unique form of city-wide government has been agreed.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I simply wish to clarify one point, because I may have misheard the Minister or she may have said something that she did not intend to say. She said that the Government want to prevent people from being elected if they represent extremist views and are below the natural threshold. My understanding is that the real debate, if we take percentages, is whether we accept the natural threshold which, given the Government's proposition, is 3.8 per cent., or whether we put up a higher threshold between that and 5 per cent. If a party received less than 3.8 per cent., it could not be elected in the next election for the London assembly because that would not be sufficient.

Ms Jackson: No, the hon. Gentleman misunderstood the argument. I was responding to a point made by the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood based on the definition of a normal threshold which, in this instance, as we have heard, could be argued to be 3.85 per cent. But, as I pointed out, it would be entirely possible, given our system, for someone to be elected at a threshold much lower than 3.85 per cent. The issue here is not that we are looking to create an artificial threshold on party political grounds. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said that he had no doubt that the present Secretary of State would not consider that for one moment, and I understand what his concerns may be in the future.

We wish to have an inclusive assembly, which allows a range of interests and views to be represented. But we are creating a unique form of city-wide government for a unique city. Given the system that we will introduce to elect the assembly and the dangers inherent in it, we believe that it would be right for the Secretary of State to have the power to set a threshold. We are proposing that that should be a threshold of not more than 5 per cent. of the vote.

Because this is an issue of such importance, and because the matters raised tonight are so sensitive, but are of major importance in a democratic society such as ours, I ask the hon. Member for Croydon, South to withdraw the amendment in the clear knowledge that the Government would not institute anything without the most—as I had occasion to say earlier—real debate on the issue.

Mr. Hughes: I seek to intervene one last time before the Minister sits down, as I anticipate she is about to do. This is a question to which I do not know the answer. Does the hon. Lady happen to know whether, within the EU, city or city-wide elections, such as those for the Paris or Barcelona councils, particularly in countries such as France or Germany where this is a real live issue—

Mr. Wilkinson: Why just in the EU?

Mr. Hughes: It could apply elsewhere, but I am concentrating on our neighbours. Do such countries have thresholds? Is there a precedent of city-wide, European, urban, multi-cultural, multi-race elections?

8.30 pm

Ms Jackson: I do not have that information at hand, but I shall be happy to obtain it and write to the hon. Gentleman. I stress again that this is a decision for the House inasmuch as the system that we are introducing is unique. As I have said, it is a new form of government. What we are considering would be the first example of a threshold being set in such circumstances. Every aspect of the systems that we are proposing must ensure public confidence. We do not want the proposal to be nodded—or even voted—through without the most comprehensive debate. In the clear knowledge that we want to return to the issue, I ask the hon. Member for Croydon, South to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Ottaway: I appreciate the Minister's measured response to the debate. She is right to point out that this is a sensitive subject.

I was not clear from her concluding remarks whether she was giving an undertaking to have another look at the issue. Perhaps she might like to clarify that.

Ms Jackson: I should be delighted to. I repeat yet again that the Government want the most detailed and searching debate on the issue. We are prepared to examine it again, but we believe that the Secretary of State should have the power to set a threshold. We have argued for 5 per cent., but we want opinions outside the House to be discussed and examined. If the hon. Gentleman will withdraw the amendment, we shall be happy to discuss the issue in detail.

Mr. Ottaway: This is the moment to discuss it in detail. What is the Minister proposing? Is she saying that if we withdraw the amendment she may make a concession on Report? It is important for that to be clear to help the Opposition make up their mind on their stance.

Ms Jackson: Because of the sensitivity of the issues and the unique nature of what we are proposing, we should be able to listen to the arguments now that the debate has been entered into. They have mainly been in favour of what we are proposing, but there will be arguments against. I pointed out to the hon. Gentleman that we are grateful for the opportunity to return to the issue on Report.

Mr. Ottaway *rose—*

Mr. Wilkinson *rose—*

Mr. Ottaway: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Wilkinson: Is my hon. Friend's interpretation of the Minister's extraordinary quasi assurance the same as mine? Does he feel that the hon. Lady is refusing to relinquish the power of the Secretary of State to decide the threshold, which will not necessarily be the natural threshold under the d'Hondt formula? Does he also agree that it shows the fatuity of the proportional d'Hondt system that it leaves us scratching around to decide whether to exclude particular candidates with derisory numbers of votes that would never secure election under a proper first-past-the-post system?

Mr. Ottaway: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, but I hope that he will not be offended if I stick to the point that I am trying to make with the Minister: whether she is making a concession to look at the issue again and return to it on Report. If so, we may well listen favourably to her proposal that we withdraw the amendment, but otherwise we consider the matter rather important. Perhaps she would like to clarify that.

Ms Jackson: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has reduced the tenor of his contributions by implying that the Government do not regard what we have been debating as particularly important. I should like to make it abundantly clear that the Government will not re-examine the principle of a threshold, but we are prepared to examine the level at which it would be set. It is necessary for the whole House to be able to consider that. If he will withdraw the amendment, we shall have an opportunity for greater debate on Report.

Mr. Ottaway: I interpret that as an undertaking from the Minister to review the level at which the threshold is set and to revisit the matter on Report.

We have a problem. I share the concern of other hon. Members about extremism. I respect those from inner-city seats who have to fight it. The Conservative party backs them in their fight. However, there is a problem. London has a huge ethical minority. I believe that it is 25 per cent. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ethical?"] I am sorry; a huge ethnic minority. If we add the further 5 per cent. from eastern Europe, the figure is 30 per cent. A respectable candidate who based his candidature on ethnic origins would be precluded by the Bill.

That is where the conflict comes. We have a desire to be democratic, but we also want to combat racism. The problem is inherent if proportional representation is introduced to a city such as London. The Government cannot have it both ways. They can have an electoral system that does not take a chance. If they introduce a different system, those risks are inevitable. The Government did not feel it necessary to introduce the mechanism in Wales or Scotland. This is not an easy decision to come to, but the Conservatives have come down in favour of the democratic argument and we believe in the natural threshold.

However, in the light of the Minister's undertaking, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question proposed, That this schedule be the Second schedule to the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I shall be brief. We do not propose to divide the Committee. To help those who may have arrived expecting a Committee vote, let me say that my judgment is that there will not be one. If they want to stay, they are welcome, but, if they do not, they can go somewhere else.

The previous debate, quite properly, became something of an exploratory discussion between the Minister for Transport in London and the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway). I want to say only that the Liberal Democrats will happily enter unconditionally into discussions with the Government. I hope that the correct interpretation of the Minister's response to the previous debate is that, outside the Committee, some discussions can take place between the parties whose members represent London in the House of Commons.

We retain our preference for the position that I expressed in the previous debate: it would be better if that power did not reside with the Secretary of State, and if the recommendation came from a body that was not party political but independent, as the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) suggested. I hope that the Government can be persuaded on that point—I do not suggest that they are not open to persuasion. I understand that the Minister for Transport in London has a preferred position, but it would be helpful if, in responding to this short stand part debate, the Minister for London and Construction said, as he always does on sensitive issues, that, outside the Committee, we can pursue ways of reaching an agreement.

If we do that, and if, in next year's elections, people stand on racist or extremist platforms, we can—as we eventually did during the second Millwall by-election—express a common view. On that occasion, the Conservative party and the Labour party, to their credit, and the Liberal Democrats were clear about how we should counter those who had entered the democratic process properly, but had done so to undermine the rights of everyone to participate equally in it.

Mr. Raynsford: This short stand part debate brings us to the end of the Committee's deliberations on the first four clauses and two schedules of the Bill. We have had an interesting series of debates on an innovative constitutional arrangement that will give London a new type of leadership and create new electoral arrangements. Inevitably, in that process, difficult issues have arisen, one of which is the scope for unrepresentative and vicious parties, peddling racial hatred, to try to secure legitimacy through election. All of us who are familiar with the problems that occurred in Millwall in the early 1990s know how dangerous that threat is to good race relations in London, which is why the issue must be taken seriously.

As my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London made clear, the Government believe that it is right for there to be a threshold to provide a safeguard against such an eventuality. No measure can provide a guarantee, but it can help to provide a safeguard. We recognise that different views have been expressed about how that threshold should be determined, at what level it should be set and how it should be expressed. Some might argue that it should appear in the Bill, rather than be determined by the Secretary of State. For that reason, my hon. Friend was happy to give the undertaking that the Government would reflect on that issue and return to it on Report.

That is illustrative of the approach to the legislation that we have taken and will continue to take. Wherever possible, we shall try to secure agreement on issues of general concern to London.

Mr. Hughes: The Committee has rightly emphasised the importance of the issue. It would be helpful if the Minister could make one more offer: to do as he has done in respect of other matters and, not only promise further Government reflection, but convene outside the Committee a forum in which we can try to reach agreement between the three parties whose members currently represent London in the House of Commons. Ideally, we will have reached a common view on the issue by the time we go into the elections for the Greater London assembly.

Mr. Raynsford: I fear the hon. Gentleman will have difficulty in securing the degree of consensus he hopes for, given the fundamentally different positions adopted by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives on most issues. However, I have given an undertaking that the Government will reflect further and I am happy to meet representatives of the Liberal Democrats and of other parties who wish to come to see me in the period between now and Report stage. With that, I urge the Committee to agree to the schedule.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Bill (Clauses 1 to 4 and Schedules 1 and 2) reported, without amendment; to lie upon the Table.

Education Funding (South Gloucestershire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Hanson.*]

8.43 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): It will come as no great surprise to hon. Members to learn that the subject of my Adjournment debate has not been the sole topic of conversation this afternoon among my fellow Liberal Democrats. Having said that, it is an issue of substantial importance to thousands of children in South Gloucestershire, who are represented by me and by the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), whose constituency includes a substantial part of South Gloucestershire, and who hopes to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The allocation of money between local authorities, especially for education, is a highly political issue because it relates to values. However, it is also a highly technical issue. I shall refer principally to those technical issues tonight, and I hope that the Minister will respond positively.

I hope not to approach the issue on a party political basis. As I have said, my arguments are principally technical and hon. Members on both sides of the House who represent South Gloucestershire constituencies—I welcome also the hon. Member for Bristol, North–West (Dr. Naysmith) who represents part of the authority area—share some of my concerns and may give voice to them during the debate.

By way of background, I should explain that South Gloucestershire is an area with a rapidly growing population—in fact, it has one of the fastest growing populations in the country. Many new employers have located to the area—including the Ministry of Defence at Abbey Wood, the aerospace industry and Hewlett Packard—and large numbers of people have moved there also. That is not a one-off phenomenon as population projections suggest that South Gloucestershire's population will also grow rapidly over the next decade or two. That presents some particular problems to which I shall refer this evening.

The Minister will be aware that I have tabled questions designed to assess the amount of money per primary pupil that authorities throughout the country receive under the standard spending assessment. The Minister will also be aware that South Gloucestershire usually finishes at the bottom of that league table. According to the written answer that I received, primary school pupils in South Gloucestershire receive an SSA of £2,215 each compared with the national average of £2,372.

I am the first to accept that any league table must have a top and a bottom—although I do not welcome the fact that South Gloucestershire has been persistently at the bottom of it. I recognise that other authorities with greater deprivation and greater needs deserve more funding. That is not my problem tonight. However, I believe that the formula must achieve its desired objective: if it is trying to capture deprivation or need, it must do so in the right way. I argue not that South Gloucestershire should be at the top or the middle of the league table, but that the formula should achieve what it is designed to achieve. South Gloucestershire has remained at the bottom of the table following the announcement of this year's settlement—we could debate the generosity or otherwise of that settlement—partly because of reasons that are technical and difficult to explain on the basis of justice.

I shall raise three principal issues, to which I hope that the Minister will respond positively. The Government allocate a certain amount of money per pupil and then multiply that sum by the number of pupils in the authority. The fundamental question is: which pupils and when? As I understand the system—I hope that the Minister will correct me if I am wrong as I do not claim to be an authority on local authority finances—the number of secondary school pupils is counted in September at the start of the academic year. That information feeds into the local government calculations in the autumn, and the money starts to filter through the following April. The process is completed within one financial year, which seems perfectly reasonable.

The system is different for primary pupils and the count is taken not in September but in the preceding January. That will not make much difference to many authorities with static populations, but it makes an enormous difference in South Gloucestershire. I asked my local council—which has kindly provided all South Gloucestershire Members with a briefing for tonight's debate—how many primary pupils were added to the count between January and September. The answer is 267—more than 1 per cent. That is the equivalent of an extra primary school in our area—and that is an extra school this year, next year and the year after because it happens every year. It is not a one-off phenomenon.

The council reckons that the figure is out of date and that, if the figure for September rather than the preceding January were used, it would receive an extra £750,000. That is serious money for South Gloucestershire. If the formula were based on up-to-date rather than out-of-date statistics, the loss to certain other authorities—assuming that the total pot remained unchanged—would be quite marginal. I do not argue that all London authorities should lose and only South Gloucestershire should gain. However, that discrepancy in the formula acutely affects my local authority and a small number of others with rapidly growing populations. If it were taken into account, it would result not in huge, sweeping losses but in only fairly modest losses elsewhere.

The council has further calculated that, over the course of a year, it spends £1.5 million educating children whom it has not counted yet and for whom it has not received any money. There cannot be any rationale or justification for such a system. I shall illustrate the most extreme case. If a family moved in February 1998 to South Gloucestershire, perhaps because of a job at the Ministry of Defence at Abbey Wood, their children would not appear in the count of pupils at primary school until January 1999. They would not, therefore, become part of the local government calculations until autumn 1999 and the money to pay for their education would not emerge until April 2000. That means that the council would face more than two years of paying for books, equipment and other costs before it received a penny.

I hope that there is a more rational system that we could use. In the age of the internet, it seems incredible that we have such out-of-date figures on the numbers of children in our primary schools. They are not difficult to count. My pre-primary school-age children move around rather a lot but even they are not too difficult to count.

It has been suggested to me that, in the autumn, the Department's civil servants are under considerable pressure gathering material and information to work out all the figures. I accept that their work has a seasonal nature and that counting the children in September would place a greater burden on the Department than counting them in the previous January. With tongue only slightly in cheek, however, I shall make the Minister an offer. I understand that there are about 18,000 primary schools in England. I will personally type in the numbers of pupils in those schools if that will make the difference. If the only obstacle to counting the children currently in school rather than those who were in school nine months ago is the civil servants' lack of time, there are ways round that. I hope that the Minister will reassure me on that point. My researcher looked very nervous when she read that part of my speech.

My second point is particular to South Gloucestershire but less so than my previous point. It relates to the education of children from beyond the local authority boundary. South Gloucestershire was recently reorganised and used to be part of the former Avon authority. Children go to and fro and now cross boundaries that did not previously exist. Therefore, partly for historical reasons, South Gloucestershire educates a particularly large number of pupils—about 3,000—from outside the authority. That number may be diminishing, but it is still substantial.

If a primary school child is to be educated in a neighbouring authority, such as Bristol—which is the most obvious authority to export pupils to South Gloucestershire—the authority will be allocated £2,338. If the same child goes half a mile up the A38, to be educated in a South Gloucestershire school, we have to educate him or her for £2,215—£123 less. The authority is already under a great deal of stress.

I am not trying to set up South Gloucestershire against Bristol, but many people move into the area and want their children educated in local schools, which are full. Those parents must understand not only that the schools are educating pupils from other authorities but that South Gloucestershire receives what it considers to be an inadequate amount of money for doing so—something that parents find particularly hard to accept.

The bizarre result of the system is that, if a child from Bristol goes to school in South Gloucestershire, central Government save money because the child is being educated in an authority with a lower SSA. It is hard to believe that the cost of educating that child is really £123 less half a mile up the A38 because the books cost the same and the teachers are on the same pay scales. If, at the very least, the money followed the child, and central Government did not profit from the arbitrary fact that the child was going over a line on a map to be educated, that would substantially help the authority.

My final point relates to the thrilling subject of the standard spending assessment formula. I suspect that the Minister and her colleagues have been bored to death by almost everyone in the country on that topic, so I shall follow suit. I am sure that she has heard many cases of special pleading as to why every authority wants more money.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Hear, hear.

Mr. Webb: Even Colchester. We need a system that is just and achieves its aims. I shall not dwell on the area cost adjustment, which is popular in the west country. I shall concentrate on the additional needs allowance aspect of the calculation.

I understand that the principal variables used to try to identify additional education needs are ethnicity and lone parenthood. It is implausible that the proportion of children from ethnic minority backgrounds is a good proxy for additional educational needs when certain ethnic minority backgrounds tend to produce children with above average educational attainment. It is a crude indicator.

South Gloucestershire is in many respects a relatively prosperous area, although with significant pockets of deprivation, but it has significant numbers of children with additional educational needs. I today asked the Library to give me another blessed league table showing the proportion of statemented children. It shows that South Gloucestershire has an above average proportion of such children. I can think of 100 reasons why such league tables might be dubious—policies vary and so on—but that example shows that, just because an area seems relatively prosperous on the face of it, it does necessarily lack children with additional educational needs. The present indicators are not picking that up.

Dr. Doug Naysmith (Bristol, North-West): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that while the increase of some 6.9 per cent. in the education SSA for the coming year for South Gloucestershire may indeed be partly explained by growth in the area and by data changes, it is nevertheless greater than it has been in recent years? If, as he has expounded so eloquently, we can improve the way in which primary school head counts are translated into SSA figures, very significant progress will have been made.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support on this very technical but basically simple issue of primary school head counts. I do not want to get into a pointless debate about whether this year's settlement is a lot or a little. My understanding from the authority is that 6.8 or 6.9 per cent., adjusted for the number of extra pupils—a number that is out of date anyway—means that we are getting the national average, but we are still around the bottom of the table. It does nothing about the technical problems, so I understand the hon. Gentleman's point.

The fundamental technical point is that the balance between the essential—I was going to say "bog standard", but I am not sure whether that is parliamentary language—figure for "ordinary" children and the tweaks for area costs and additional needs seems to be wrong. The variations across the country in the cost of educating one child seem to me to be too great to relate to the variation in true costs. As far as I can see, that is because the core figure for "ordinary" children seems to have too little weight and the variable factors seem to have too much.

One might ask how South Gloucestershire has managed so far. It has done so in two ways. The first is by spending several million pounds in excess of its SSA.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I should like to reinforce the point about the head count, which would be of great benefit to my constituency. When a local authority area is given an SSA, it does not necessarily mean that the money is provided to meet it. In order for

[Mr. Adrian Sanders]

some local authorities to spend up to their education SSA level, they have to make cuts in other services. It seems as though central Government are abdicating their responsibility and passing it to local councils which are then blamed for the cuts, when in fact it is the inadequacies of central Government funding that are to blame. This is not a party political point—that policy was pursued rigorously by the previous Government and, unfortunately, the same ideas seem to be creeping into this Government's policies.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comment. With his background in local government, he understands far better than I do the arcane niceties of local authority funding. I hope that the Minister responds to that point when she sums up.

I was setting out how South Gloucestershire has coped. It has coped by spending £7 million above its education SSA this year. With capping in place—various versions of it, at least—that means cutting other services. That in turn means that I get letters from pensioners asking why they are paying for social services when they used not to, and it means raiding the reserves, but I regret to say that the reserves are pretty nearly empty.

The other services are in many respects underfunded rather than overfunded, and the only conclusion is that things cannot continue as they are. South Gloucestershire cannot go on raiding its reserves and cutting other services. Any allowances that the Minister can make tonight to deal with some of the injustices in the formula will be gratefully received.

I am not asking that South Gloucestershire be moved to the top of the table, or even the middle. I am simply asking that some manifest injustices, especially the use of out-of-date figures on primary school pupils, be corrected. I hope that the Minister will send us home tonight with a message for the children of South Gloucestershire that, at long last, under this Government the funding for their education will soon be put on a proper footing.

9 pm

Mr. Roger Berry (Kingswood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing this debate and on an excellent speech. I agree, I think, with everything that he said. The issue is extremely important to his constituents, my constituents—three-quarters of whom reside in South Gloucestershire—and the constituents of my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol, North-West (Dr. Naysmith) and for Wansdyke (Dan Norris). We have all made representations to Ministers on this and related issues. Indeed, on one occasion we managed to write a joint letter—all in the tradition of Labour and Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament agreeing to get rid of tribalism and to co-operate with and listen to each other.

I notice the absence of interest of a single Conservative Member in a debate on educational funding in South Gloucestershire. I have been wondering why so many Liberal Democrats are present. I am sure that it is because they anticipated a quality speech from the hon. Member for Northavon, and that it had nothing to do with whether he would announce his candidature for his party's leadership.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Member, but we should remind ourselves that this is a debate and not a rally.

Mr. Berry: I am not the campaign manager of the hon. Member for Northavon, and I of course accept that rebuke. I merely emphasise that the four hon. Members—including myself—to whom I have referred, have very seriously supported the arguments of South Gloucestershire council on this issue.

I acknowledge and welcome the fact that the increase in South Gloucestershire's education standard spending assessment is significantly greater than in previous years. Some schools in my constituency are already benefiting from the new deal. There are new classrooms, and class sizes are coming down as a result of the Government's initiatives. I warmly welcome the substantial additional funding for education overall.

Like the hon. Member for Northavon, I feel strongly that South Gloucestershire council is being treated unfairly, but I do not do so simply because of a place in a league table. League tables are quite useful, but given that some local authorities must be at the top, some in the middle and some at the bottom, it is sensible to ask why they are in such places and whether there is any case for doing something about it. League tables are a guide to asking sensible questions. When I do so about South Gloucestershire council's ranking for education SSAs, I must confess that I reach very similar conclusions to the hon. Gentleman.

Why is South Gloucestershire council's education SSA so low? First, it is due to the allowance for area cost adjustment. I say no more about that except that at least four hon. Members present, who have served on either the former Avon authority or district councils in that area, have made this argument to successive Governments year after year. We all believe that, for our part of the country, the way in which the area cost adjustment is dealt with is inequitable.

Secondly, there is the issue of additional educational needs, about which, as the hon. Member for Northavon has said, concern has been recognised. The Government have recognised that that, too, is flawed. Unfortunately, however, we do not yet have a more satisfactory solution.

Thirdly, the education SSA in South Gloucestershire is too low because of the date on which children in school are counted to calculate it, as has been mentioned. The primary SSA for the next financial year, 1999–2000, is based on the number of pupils in school in January 1998—the beginning of last year. Obviously, pupils who started primary school in September 1998 will not be funded by the SSA until April 2000, which is a delay of 18 months.

I am aware of the justification for using the January figures for primary school children and the September figures for secondary school children. The unfortunate thing about children is that they do not all become five at the beginning of the school year.

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Berry: The Minister is right. It is profoundly awkward and it is a serious reason why dealing with the count for the primary SSA is more complex and difficult

than dealing with that for children starting secondary education. One can see the argument that, if it has to be September, January or April, why not take January, and I dare say that that could be the justification for doing so. Unfortunately, schools cannot staff classrooms on that basis. They have to plan to have teachers there throughout the year.

Therefore, a general problem is confronted when the count is based on youngsters in primary school in January, but South Gloucestershire has the particular problem that, because of rapid growth, the relevant pupil numbers are much more out of date than for the majority of other local education authorities. I am sure that it will be said that, this time round, the increase in the education SSA for South Gloucestershire is significantly better than in previous years, as I said, and I welcome that. It might even be said that the increase is one of the largest in the country, and that would be true. The precise reason why it is one of the largest is rapid population growth, because pupil numbers are rising by about 2 per cent. each year. South Gloucestershire is being unfairly treated as regards the primary SSA precisely because primary school numbers are rising by that much. That rapid growth in population—at Emersons Green in particular, but also elsewhere—means that the figures are seriously disadvantaging the council.

The director of financial resources—it used to be treasurer, which was easier to remember—information technology and so forth for South Gloucestershire council, Richard Szadziewski, who is the officer responsible, estimates that the council will have to spend £1.6 million to fund children who are in school, but who do not exist as far as the SSA calculation is concerned.

The SSA for primary education should be calculated on the basis of the number of children of primary age who were in school in the previous September, as the hon. Member for Northavon said. I urge the Minister seriously to consider that suggestion. If that change cannot be introduced for 1999-2000, I seriously urge her and her colleagues to consider introducing it in the following year.

The present system is manifestly unjust to a local education authority that is experiencing a rapid increase in pupil numbers. We are not talking about changing the formula. Nor are we talking about a difficult negotiation, in which there will be winners and losers so that it will be a problem. In this case, we are talking about simply changing the data to which the formula is applied. That would make a profound difference to South Gloucestershire and, perhaps, one or two other local authorities, but it would have virtually no impact anywhere else.

In conclusion, and I apologise if I have spoken too long, I not only acknowledge but warmly welcome the fact that South Gloucestershire council has received a significant increase in its education SSA. It is the best SSA for years but—this must be said—a significant reason for that is the increase in pupil numbers. The increase in the education SSA does not diminish the strength of the council's argument that education funding at present is unfair. I urge the Minister and her ministerial colleagues to consider these issues further.

9.10 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): First, I offer my congratulations to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on raising the topic that is before us, which is clearly one that will concern his constituents and all those who live in the council area. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) in saying that I think the hon. Gentleman delivered the message in a sensitive and sensible way, which enables us to have a decent conversation about an important issue. I acknowledge the interest that my hon. Friend and other colleagues who represent seats in the area have shown in this issue.

Before I come to answer the questions that have been raised—I shall discuss the fundamental issues in some detail—I want as a Minister with responsibility for education to acknowledge the achievements of schools within Gloucestershire. Whatever their input in terms of finance, their output is very good. The key stage 2 results for the key subjects of both English and maths are above the national average. That comment is not intended to score a cheap point—"If you can do that with a small amount of money, I might take some more off you next year." I will take any opportunity to praise good quality teaching and effective learning wherever that may be.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood said, the debate takes place in an atmosphere and against a background of an increasing amount of money going into schools. I understand that this is an argument about the share of the pot, but I know that I would not have been expected to reply to the debate without making it clear that the pot is larger this year than last year, and that it will be larger still over the next three years.

The fact that there will be a £19 billion increase over the settlement period of the comprehensive spending review enables us, perhaps, to address some of the issues that will arise. It is far more difficult to do that at a time of falling budgets than when they are increasing. I accept, of course, that if there is more money available, there is an argument for wanting a fair share of the cake if the cake is about to grow. I am happy that the point has been made that the money that is being made available is increasing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood is right to say that education SSAs will rise by 5.7 per cent. this year. South Gloucestershire's provisional education SSA will rise by 7.2 per cent. I do not know where that puts it on the league table, but I know that measured against the comparable figure last year, it is an increase that is above the national average. My hon. Friend was right to say that that is because of increased pupil numbers. In some ways, because the pot is larger and because most of it is delivered on pupil-led funding, that has been reflected in an increase in the SSA. That is the position whatever count is taken. The debate comes down to the SSA formula because that is the criterion that decides how much money will go to each local authority and then to schools.

An important point is when we do the count. I shall not argue that it would not be better to have more recent figures of pupil numbers for deciding the count. That makes sense and there is neither an educational argument nor an economic one for using any figures but the most recent that it is possible to obtain—and it is essential to validate them and to ensure that they are robust.

It should not always be assumed that greater numbers will mean more money. The crucial factor is rate of growth compared with rates of growth within other local authorities. There could be a gain by not having an

[Ms Estelle Morris]

accurate reflection because of the comparable rates of growth within other local authorities. An individual rate of growth might be large and it might be thought large compared with other local authorities, and that would be the key point. There may be more children in schools, but how is that reflected when compared with pupil growth across the nation? The fact that pupil numbers have grown nationally means that the national pot from which resources are distributed has been larger this time round.

It would be a good idea if the September count used for secondary schools could also be used for primary schools. I was grateful for the offer made by the hon. Member for Northavon, although I suspect that he may not be the only Liberal Democrat Member who is filling in job application forms this evening. With respect, if the solution was as simple as typing numbers into a computer, I would instruct our officials to do so. I would make sure that the allocation of civil servants at that key point was sufficient to allow us to do that.

The critical date is not when the money starts being spent in schools, but when the local authority settlement is announced. There is a relatively short time between September and the date when the Government must make decisions about that. One of the things that I have learnt since becoming a Minister is that the figures are checked, rechecked, and double and triple checked, because as the hon. Gentleman said, key decisions depend on those figures.

I am told by civil servants that although they find it possible to carry out such checks in that time for the 6,000 secondary schools, they do not believe that at present they could do the same for the 20,000 primary schools. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood remarked, at the start of the school year, there is some fluctuation before the numbers settle down, especially as primary schools may have a common enrolment date, but do not have a common starting date.

Nevertheless, we would be happy to reduce the time between allocation and count. If technology makes that possible in the medium term, there is nothing to prevent us from doing so. That is our wish. We have no ulterior motives, provided that I could promise hon. Members that the numbers would be as accurate as they are now.

The best that I can offer now is to say that I hear what all hon. Members have said. The issue affects other local authorities as well. The fact that the hon. Gentleman raised the matter tonight will serve as a reminder to me and help me to keep it in mind. When we can change the counting date, I have no objection to doing so, and nor do the Government.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. LEAs have a rough idea in September how many primary pupils they have to educate, as they have to pay the teachers' salaries, arrange for the contracts to be drawn up, buy the books and so on. Would it not be possible to get a provisional figure from all LEAs, with some penalty mechanism for LEAs that give an inflated figure? Is it not better to have the right sort of figures—I dread the phrase "the right ball-park"—rather than to use a figure from eight months before that turns out to be completely wrong? We could at least now set the date as April. I do not believe that it takes from January to November to get the numbers right.

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman paused after he said "the right", and went on to say, "sort of figures". He was correct the first time. It is better to allocate money on the basis of actual pupils, rather than on estimated pupil numbers. We have considered the use of estimates as an option, but that would create new bureaucracy to pay money back, claw it back and argue with local authorities about the accuracy of figures.

That was one of the issues discussed in "Fair Funding". On the whole, schools are not keen on using projected numbers. They would prefer their money to be allocated on actual numbers. The hon. Gentleman's argument has some validity, but there are strong arguments against it. It would affect our ability to move quickly if we paid out money to some local authorities and later had to claw it back.

The hon. Member for Northavon perceived correctly that I was about to move on to the other tricky point—what constitutes the standard spending assessment formula. I shall happily keep his point in mind. I shall also happily reflect and take advice on whether it is ever worth moving the timetable by only a few months. Making such a change is very much not a political decision, but a matter of the political machinery practising the art of the possible. No political impediment stops our receiving more accurate and more recent figures; no one has any such political agenda. As I now realise that the hon. Gentleman has an interest in the matter, I shall keep him informed of developments.

SSAs are a terribly complex matter. I realise that hon. Members know that SSAs are not—and should not be—determined to provide the same spending level for each pupil, but should ensure that the same education standard is available across the country, acknowledging the fact that the cost of providing education varies from one local education authority to another.

Additional education needs, providing free school meals, meeting small schools' transport costs in rural areas and labour costs in the south-east and in London are all factors that have to be considered. The hon. Member for Northavon cited two factors—ethnicity and single-parent families—as major elements in determining SSAs. The fact is that there are so many elements in determining SSAs that the process is an absolute minefield. Moreover, the debate on the relationships between those elements, too, is a minefield.

The hon. Member for Northavon said, for example, that ethnicity surely is not the key factor in determining whether extra resources are needed in a classroom. Interestingly, although ethnicity is a factor at some key stages, poverty becomes a greater factor by key stage 4. Moreover, the situation changes at each key stage and across the education system. Therefore—although it would not reflect real life—it would be good, and easier administratively, if everyone could agree on some factors in determining SSAs.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): As a kindred spirit—now that South Gloucestershire is back in the historic county of Gloucestershire—I can have some say in this debate, even if we are in a different education authority. My hon.

Friend the Minister has been making a valuable point. I appreciate why the educational needs dilemma has not yet been resolved, as doing so might have made the poorest children in London worse off. However, surely there will be a need for a mechanism in the next three years to consider how we can manage change, given that additional educational needs seem to be one of the many ingredients for disparities and unfairness in the formula.

Ms Morris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments, and shall try to deal with them—particularly and pointedly—in a moment.

It is amazing that not one hon. Member or council leader queued up to tell me that his or her local authority's SSA was too generous. I smiled when the hon. Member for Northavon started his speech by saying that he would not be making a party political argument. I can tell the House exactly how the battle-lines were drawn in the discussions on SSAs: they were drawn parochially, according to a local authority's boundaries.

Even if we could have changed SSAs and offered funding protection this year, at a time of increased spending, some local authority leaders and local authority associations would still have been split on the matter, as they wanted also to increase their share of a larger cake.

As the hon. Member for Northavon will know, in the past few months the Government have been consistent in dealing with the matter. The bottom line is that, had there been general agreement on the matter among local authorities and local authority associations, we might have been able this year to make some progress in adopting an SSA that was accepted as being fair. However, there was no such agreement.

I feel strongly that we cannot fundamentally change SSAs every year—or even every three, five or 10 years—but that we have to get SSAs right. This year, despite all the effort that has been put into the matter and all the contributions that have been made, we did not feel that there was unanimity or that we could have made more progress. However, that is not the end of the debate.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) that more work needs to be done on that issue, and the Government hope to return to it over the lifetime of this Parliament. We have asked local authority associations to continue with their work, and we will continue to do so.

I represent a constituency in Birmingham, in the midlands, not a southern seat. I am not saying that the SSA is fair and equitable and can be defended on either pure educational grounds or even on the ground of giving opportunity to all children. We are all at one about that. I hope that, in this time of an increasing budget, we can seize the opportunity to achieve something that, although it is not perfect, we can all live with and that does a reasonably balanced job of treating our children fairly.

As a Minister, I have to live with that SSA formula, both this year and next year, but I want to do something about what I believe to be inequality of resource allocation. I must use the mechanisms that are to hand and, because of that, we have looked carefully at the money that does not come through SSAs, but through the standards fund and other pots of money over which the Government have more control.

I remind hon. Members who represent the South Gloucestershire area that, as well as the 7.2 per cent. increase in SSA funding, we are making £3.3 million available through the standards fund. That is 10 per cent. more than we made available for the local authority last year and it includes £500,000 specifically to reduce class sizes. Capital funding this year for South Gloucestershire is £900,000.

When the hon. Member for Northavon and I met, I thought that we would discuss performance tables in respect of allocation of resources because he was bound to say that South Gloucestershire is at the bottom of those tables. I do not deny that; it is clear that pupils in his area receive less funding on a straight SSA basis than any others.

Where we have flexibility, however, we are trying to put resources into certain areas. The argument is not about this year's underfunding; underfunding is historic, because the argument has never been tackled and these difficult issues have never been grasped. It is interesting to compare funding in respect of the standards fund. South Gloucestershire has received more standards fund allocation per pupil than more than 115 authorities, and more capital funding than more than 135 authorities. South Gloucestershire would appear in the top part of such a league table.

South Gloucestershire received 20 per cent. more money per pupil through the standards fund than the national average, and 75 per cent. more money per pupil than the national average through our support for capital funding. I know that that is a smaller stream of revenue and capital, but that was where we had flexibility this year and where we could begin to try to rectify some of the faults, which I agree exist, within the SSA formula.

Authorities that do badly under the SSA formula are stuck with that for the next two or three years, but it may be possible to find other ways of getting money into those local authorities. That may offer some reassurance—although big bucks, to use a crude term, are not involved—about the plight of local authorities that get a rough deal in SSAs, through no fault of their own and because of what happened in their area years ago.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Will the Minister therefore confirm that the impact of what she has told the House is that, when using the flexibility that she claims the Department has to choose which of the 16,000 LEA bids made since the Government took office will be successful, the Department is using as one of the criteria for selection the position on the SSA per pupil league table? Is the implication of that that LEAs that are high on that league table are wasting their time putting in a bid?

Ms Morris: No. The criterion must always be the quality of the bid. The hon. Gentleman knows that when decisions are made, we always look at the overall picture. What will never be tolerated, however, is a bad bid—someone going through the standards fund to a local authority just to get the money. The key issue is that the Government's national agenda must be met. I am delighted if we can ensure that local authorities' needs are met through sources of Government funding, of which there are many.

Mr. Webb: Some of my constituents in Gloucestershire will say that we receive more capital funding because our schools are falling down. One school in my constituency has nets to catch the roof tiles so that they do not hit the children on the head, and home economics and science classes are taught in corridors. Another school has had to approach the lord of the manor for more land because it is overcrowded. I suspect that the fact that we have received more money from that bit of the pot simply reflects the continuing unmet need. My real concern tonight is about current expenditure—bread and butter money for year-in, year-out needs.

Ms Morris: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. He was perfectly right in the first half of his comments: it is wrong that a school in his authority should have to have a net to catch tiles falling off the roof. I assume that the hon. Gentleman is not saying that that is not important, so he should not say that he is not asking for increased capital spending. If I were him, I would gratefully receive it and shout it from the rooftops with tiles on. Although the debate has been about revenue funding, we are discussing the whole picture.

This debate has been useful. It will continue because I sense great dissatisfaction among many hon. Members about how their local authority is dealt with in terms of SSA methodology. We do not want to change it to make it worse; we want to change it to reflect real needs, so that children throughout the country have a similar standard of education. Given that that is such a large task with huge implications, it is worth getting right. On that basis, I am entirely happy that we have not tackled it this year, but very much hope to return to it next year.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Northavon for his comments. I shall reflect on them and keep him and other hon. Members informed if we are able to make further progress.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-seven minutes to Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 21 January 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fairness at Work White Paper

1. **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): What assessment he has made of the impact on families of the new rights proposed in the Fairness at Work White Paper. [65190]

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian McCartney): The measures in our proposed legislation will encourage a partnership approach and a fairer workplace environment, which will benefit all employees and their families.

We are introducing nine specific measures, which will help parents and carers to balance work and family life by providing three months' parental leave for mothers, fathers and adoptive parents, by providing domestic time off in emergencies for all employees and by simplifying and improving women's maternity rights.

Our proposals were developed in consultation with the key stakeholders. Four out of five employers who commented on the White Paper's family-friendly employment proposals supported them in some measure. Our proposals to simplify the maternity provisions received almost universal support.

Mr. Borrow: I am sure that many families will welcome the White Paper. Does my hon. Friend agree that employers in both the public and private sectors benefit from the operation of family-friendly policies? Will he influence his Department to spread best practice from both public and private sectors to employers who do not yet operate family-friendly policies?

Mr. McCartney: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Our fairness at work proposals have received a great deal of support throughout government, employers' organisations and trade unions, which are working together to improve best practice. The Bill will result in a significant change in culture, with the support of virtually every employer in Britain.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Has the Minister assessed the impact of parental leave provisions on the employment of women in the future, given that his departmental assessment is that those provisions will cost £110 million?

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman should realise that the parental leave directive was agreed by employers and trade unions, which made joint recommendations. As a consequence, the overwhelming majority of employers support the measures, which will at last give men and women a chance to balance their work responsibilities with their caring responsibilities at home.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): Does my hon. Friend accept that many family members work in companies that employ fewer than 20 people and that, in some cases, those are among the worst employers in the country? In view of that, will he give further thought to reducing the number of employees in a company who are excluded from the provisions of the proposed legislation?

Mr. McCartney: The proposals are comprehensive. My hon. Friend is asking about a different issue, which will be dealt with in the fairness at work Bill under recognition issues. There will be no change in those proposals. Employers of whatever size will have opportunities to be represented on issues of discipline and grievance procedures. Application of the proposals will be universal and parental leave has the support of employers' organisations.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): May I take this opportunity to welcome the new team, although it is nice to have to deal with one of the old lags first. Will the Minister enlighten the House in two respects? First, will he clarify which is the authorised version of the recognition proposals—the version according to Derby, South or the version according to Hartlepool—that has finally been adopted?

Secondly, on fairness at work more generally, will the Minister explain how he can make statements about universal support and a wide welcome for his family-friendly policies when he seems incapable of producing an overall assessment of the compliance cost to British industry?

Mr. McCartney: From one old lag to a very old lag, I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming my continuing presence at the Department. I may qualify for unfair dismissal under the Bill.

Opposition Members must realise that we have taken into account the effects of the proposals on all workers in Britain. The hon. Gentleman is a little off-beam. He simply cannot accept the changing culture in the workplace, with employers and employees striving for better partnership arrangements, including a partnership that reflects their rights and responsibilities. When we publish the Bill soon, he will see in the round the comprehensive nature of our proposals and the overwhelming support that they will receive from people in the workplace—both employees and sensible employers.

Investment

2. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What discussions he has had with his international partners on the prospects for an international agreement on investment; and if he will make a statement. [65191]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Brian Wilson): Negotiations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of a multilateral agreement on investment are no longer taking place. The United Kingdom and the European Union as a whole have called for investment to be on the agenda of a future round of negotiations in the World Trade Organisation. Decisions on the content of that agenda will be taken at the WTO ministerial meeting later this year. In the meantime, the UK is participating in the analytical work of the WTO trade and investment working group.

Fiona Mactaggart: Many people in my constituency who expressed concerns about the MAI process will be relieved at its collapse. They urge me to ensure that the future process is less deformed and takes better account of environmental, social and developmental issues in discussions on international investment. Will the Minister reassure me that a framework will be provided for future negotiations?

Mr. Wilson: I endorse my hon. Friend's comments. I came late to this issue, but there was no doubt that, from the outset, the perception arose that this was a multinational conspiracy, and that it was the developed world putting one over on the less-developed world. It does not matter about the accuracy of those perceptions, the fact that they were allowed to run made it extremely difficult to secure the agreement that was being sought.

We should start with a clean sheet of paper and seek to obtain an agreement on investment rules that serves both the developed and the less developed world. We must also make it clear from the outset that it must be done on the basis of consensus, and that it must take full account of environmental and social issues, such as conditions of employment.

Small Firms

3. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): If he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policies to assist small firms. [65192]

The Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry (Mr. Michael Wills): Small and medium businesses are crucial to a successful enterprise economy, and the Government are firmly committed to stimulating the creation, competitiveness and growth of new and small businesses.

The key principles underlying the Government's approach include fostering an enterprise culture that encourages innovators and risk takers; providing and maintaining a supportive economic environment; identifying and removing barriers to growth and providing high quality business support for firms at all stages of their development. The Government also work within the European Union to help to further these aims throughout Europe.

Mr. Flight: I welcome the new Minister to his post. Is he aware of the recent national insurance contributions regulations, which can impose huge additional taxation on entrepreneurial businesses, specifically on approved and unapproved pension schemes when companies go to the market to float for money, and on share conversions in management buy-outs where the business is succeeding? If he is aware of that, please could he make appropriate representations to his colleagues at the Department of Social Security for some amelioration of the situation? If he is not fully aware of it, please could he look into in the matter?

Mr. Wills: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words of welcome. The Government are proud of their record on corporate taxation. We have conducted a major reform, and as a result corporation tax is at its lowest level ever—20 per cent. for small firms. That is the lowest level of any major European economy.

Yvette Cooper (Pontefract and Castleford): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position, and wish him well at the Dispatch Box. Is he aware of the importance to small firms of proper enforcement of the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998? A company in my constituency received a letter from Rentokil saying that it was prepared to continue business only on its own late terms with limited interest. Since I wrote to the Department, Rentokil has withdrawn that letter, and has promised to comply with the Act. What other action is the Department taking to ensure compliance with the Act?

Mr. Wills: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind words of welcome. I reassure her that the Government are committed to changing the whole culture of payment. The 1998 Act was an important start, but we realise that we must do more. That is why we have established the better payment practice code. The better payment practice group contains representatives from all sides of industry, including large and small firms. It ensures that the spirit as well as the letter of the Act is implemented. I understand that Rentokil has agreed to comply with both the spirit and the letter of the Act.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I welcome the Minister to his new post. Is he aware that, in a survey this month, more than 50 per cent. of small business owners said that they would not consider starting a business because of the burden of legislation they now face? Will he give an assurance that legislation this year will not affect the viability of small businesses?

Mr. Wills: The Government are committed—*[Interruption.]* We are, indeed, committed to small firms and to ensuring that as many people as possible start up small firms. I am delighted to tell the House that the latest evidence from Barclays bank and National Westminster is that business start-ups are up in the third quarter of last year compared with the third quarter of 1997. It shows that the Government's policies on small firms are working.

As regards legislation, we are aware of the problems that small firms experience in complying with regulations. That is why we have set up the better regulation task force to ensure that regulations are implemented effectively and sensitively in relation to small firms and, indeed, all businesses.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): An important part of the Government's policies to support small firms is help with start-ups—especially in areas such as Rotherham, where the ratio between employers and population is only about half the national average. We welcome the Government's commitment to supporting 10,000 new start-ups in the high-tech sector this year, but what steps is the Department taking to support start-ups in other industries?

Mr. Wills: We are committed to helping all start-ups. The competitiveness White Paper is particularly dedicated to helping businesses to start up when we think that they have a high growth potential that will create jobs, productivity and growth, but, as I have said, we are committed to helping all start-ups. That is what business links are tasked with, and that is what we shall continue to deliver.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. Under Labour, only a few people are born to office. Some seek office to live well, and some have office thrust upon them. As the Minister has no salary and does not do red boxes, I assume that he is in the latter category.

One of the most important things that the Government can do to assist small firms is to ensure that the law applying to companies is fully and fairly enforced on all of them, so that they can trade on equal terms. The Opposition welcome the institution of a rogue director hot line, which the Government have set up to help small firms in this context. Does the Minister agree that Mr. Derek Draper should be referred to the hot line for his violations of company law at 3C Ltd? Does he agree that new Labour establishment should be referred to it for the failure of Progress Ltd. to submit accounts for that Blairite magazine—and does he think that he should be referred to it for his failure to submit the necessary paperwork relating to one of his companies?

Mr. Wills: I hoped that the right hon. Gentleman might start the new year with a more gracious approach, but he has reassured me nevertheless by continuing in the spirit that he adopted last year.

Of course—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Spit it out!

Mr. Wills: That is exactly what I am about to do, and the hon. Gentleman will welcome the answer when I give it.

Let me set the record straight in relation to my own affairs. Fellows of All Souls—of which I believe the right hon. Gentleman is one—used to conduct their research in libraries, and they used to employ researchers. It appears that they now conduct their research in *The Times* diary, in which that story appeared. Unfortunately, those who snout around in the inaccurate and the meretricious come up with the meretricious and the inaccurate, which is what the story was. Every company with which I have been associated has filed its returns in compliance with the deadlines set by Companies house.

As for the other matters to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, I am sure that the Department will examine them closely, fairly and without doing anyone any undue favours.

Science Spending

4. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What assessment he has made of the strength of the relationship between science spending and UK competitiveness. [65193]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): Our ability to compete effectively as a knowledge-driven economy will depend on our commitment to scientific research and its exploitation.

In partnership with the Wellcome Trust, we will spend an extra £1.4 billion on science and engineering over the next three years. That will ensure that we can retain our position as a world-class country in terms of science, reversing the decline in investment for which the last Government were responsible.

Dr. Ladyman: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new post, and thank him for his answer.

Given what my right hon. Friend has said about the link between science and competitiveness, and given that the Government, through the comprehensive spending review, have already been more generous to public-sector science than most scientists dreamed was possible, will my right hon. Friend tell us what plans he has to stimulate further science and research in the private sector? In particular, will he tell us what thought he has given to fiscal incentives such as tax rebates for companies that reinvest a significant proportion of their income in research?

Mr. Byers: I thank my hon. Friend for his warm words of welcome. I agree that the £1.4 billion extra is an excellent first start, as is the 20 per cent. increase in the Department's innovation budget, but I regard it just as a start. It is beginning to deliver our commitment as a Government to science, but we can do more.

My hon. Friend has drawn the House's attention to the possibility of tax incentives for the private sector to support research and development. It is true that, with the exception of the pharmaceutical industry, spending in the private sector on research and development has declined dramatically over recent years. We need to do something to remedy that. We will look closely at how we can introduce a financial regime—a tax regime—that will promote and encourage investment in those important sectors.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I also welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his post.

May I make a serious point about the level at which science, information technology and so on is represented within Government? I have long argued that we should have a Minister of State, rather than an Under-Secretary of State, in the Department of Trade and Industry to do

that important job, but what signal does it give to the rest of business that the Secretary of State's Department has two unpaid Ministers dealing with science and technology? Surely that is a worthwhile job within Government, not just an add-on that is not even paid. Will he please start fighting for science and technology in his Department?

Mr. Byers: Whether the Ministers are unpaid or not, they have managed to achieve far more in their period of office than the hon. Gentleman's Government ever did. The fact that we have secured an extra £1.4 billion for the science base shows that we are achieving value for money from our Ministers. I should have thought that he would congratulate the Department on that fact. If it helps him, he will be pleased to know that, as the Cabinet Minister responsible for the Department, I shall take a close personal interest in how we can encourage and exploit the science base and the knowledge that we have.

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. In particular, I welcome his comments about the boost to the science and engineering base. Is he aware, however, that, under the Tories, spending on development fell to a paltry 3 per cent. of total civil Government R and D expenditure, perpetuating the problem of Britain being good at R but bad at D, and of commercial ideas that were generated in Britain being exploited elsewhere? Will he talk to his colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment about what can be done to improve the percentage of expenditure that goes on D, so that we can have a joined-up Government approach to tackling the development gap?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I have already begun discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about how the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Education and Employment can jointly deal with the many weaknesses that exist because of the situation that we inherited. There is no doubt that it is one of those sectors where we have the potential to be world class. It has been neglected and we now have a Government who are delivering on that important agenda. We intend to move forward and to deliver on our commitment to the science base and to our scientists, so that we can ensure that we are world class in the century ahead.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I too congratulate the Secretary of State on becoming the third Labour holder of that office in under two years. I wish him every success in trying to clear up the dreadful mess that was left behind by his predecessor—a mess both in the Department and in the wider business world. I trust that the plight of British industry will be at the top of the Secretary of State's list of priorities.

Given the Government's enthusiasm for the promotion of genetically modified food, does the Secretary of State see any conflict of interest in Lord Sainsbury, the Minister in the other place with responsibility for technology, being an investor in Sainsbury's, the first supermarket to promote that food; an investor in Diatech and Innotech, two companies that are involved in the technology sector; and having links with the Gatsby Trust, which finances research in the sector—while at the same time controlling policy and grants to the industry? Will the Secretary of State ask his Minister to step aside and find a Minister who has no actual or apparent conflict of interest to do the work?

Mr. Byers: I shall not be asking that Minister to step aside because steps have been taken to ensure that there is no conflict of interest. On the day on which the House of Lords has produced a significant report on GM foods, I would have expected that, as the principal Opposition spokesman on such matters, the right hon. Gentleman would have addressed the substance of that report. The fact that he has failed to do so says so much more about his priorities than it does about his real desire to move the debate forward in this important area.

I have no doubt that there is no conflict in my Department on these matters. I will ensure that there is an open and transparent public debate about GM foods which will restore public confidence in this important area. I can guarantee that, but it will not be helped if, instead of seeking to rebuild public confidence in our science and scientists, he simply stands on the sidelines sniping continuously. That is no way to conduct a responsible and reasonable debate.

Internet

5. **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): What steps he will take to encourage UK business and industry to use the internet. [65194]

11. **Ms Christine Russell** (City of Chester): What steps he is taking to encourage the development of electronic commerce in the UK. [65201]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): The opportunities offered to businesses large and small by the internet are enormous. That is why the Government placed the use of the internet, and in particular the development of electronic commerce, at the heart of our recently published White Paper. Our goal is an ambitious one: to make the UK the best place in the world for electronic trading. The White Paper set out a wide-ranging agenda of modernisation to achieve this, including an electronic commerce Bill to remove legal barriers, and an extra investment of some £20 million in the information society initiative, to provide practical support and assistance to small firms.

Dr. Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for that full answer. Given the prediction, which he will acknowledge, that, before the year 2002, there may be a 30-fold increase in the use of electronic commerce throughout the globe, does my hon. Friend agree that that represents a major threat to those who are complacent about its importance as well as some amazing opportunities for those who wish to grasp them? I accept what my hon. Friend said about the legislative background, but does he agree that the Government need to be pro-active so that British companies recognise the opportunities and have access to the skills and finance that they may require?

Dr. Howells: My hon. Friend is quite right. On checking, I can tell my hon. Friend that e-commerce is currently valued at $12 billion a year world wide and that by the year 2002 it is reckoned that it will be $350 billion

to $500 billion a year and we must have a considerable piece of that action. The Government have launched the adviser skills initiative to ensure that businesses advisers can deliver consistent and integrated advice on information technology and best business practice.

We now have an e-commerce resource centre operating on the internet which will provide businesses with the information, advice and the tools necessary to exploit fully the opportunities of e-commerce. We are drawing up an electronic code of conduct for businesses, which will enable traders to have effective redress and access to complaints procedures and to be identified by a digital hallmark so that everybody involved in e-commerce has confidence that business will be delivered securely.

Ms Christine Russell: Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the business link in my constituency of Chester, which runs a large number of innovative and imaginative programmes and courses to help small firms in particular gain further experience and access to business? I believe that people from 200 small firms attended the last training course. How does my hon. Friend think that the forthcoming e-commerce Bill will further extend the opportunities, particularly for small businesses and start-up businesses?

Dr. Howells: I should certainly like to congratulate the business link in my hon. Friend's constituency. Across the country, there are also other initiatives that are extremely interesting and take the issue seriously—which, from the jibes that I heard coming from the Opposition Benches a moment ago, is more than Conservative Members can do. The electronic commerce Bill will establish trust in electronic trading by introducing a voluntary licensing scheme for organisations providing secure message services. The Bill will modernise the law so that it recognises electronic signatures and will, whenever it makes sense to do so, remove current laws that insist on the use of paper. The Bill will introduce voluntary licensing agreements for bodies providing electronic signature services and confidentiality services. It will also provide new powers and proper authority for law enforcement agencies to gain legal access to encryption keys and other information protecting the secrecy of stored or transmitted data.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Clearly, this is going to be a complex Bill. Will the Minister say when the draft Bill will be published? Is it intended that it shall be introduced in the House or in another place? The Minister will be aware that the Trade and Industry Select Committee is about to conduct an inquiry into e-commerce. Will the Government consider the Committee's work effectively as pre-legislative scrutiny work?

Dr. Howells: I congratulate the Committee on the interesting and pioneering work that it has done. The Government hope very much to introduce the Bill just after Easter. I have absolutely no doubt that full account will be taken of the Committee's work.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): May I also welcome the new Front Benchers to their new positions, and welcome their support for e-commerce? I should like to take the Minister a stage further in his remarks on the regulation of access to e-mail transmission codes. He will be aware of the public's great concern about how access to the codes should be controlled—about the "trusted third party" concept. He will be equally well aware of the great concern about whether organisations such as GCHQ should become a so-called trusted third party. If the House is really concerned about controlling criminal activity on the internet, would it not be much better to press for control of pre-paid mobile telephones, which are used by drug dealers, than to try to foist control by a Government agency on electronic commerce?

Dr. Howells: That is a long and complex question, and I truly hope that it will not be a long and complex answer. I hope also that the hon. Gentleman's question was not a first bid for his party's leadership. Strong encryption is very useful, as it is used to protect the movement of huge amounts of money through cyberspace. We shall be very careful in ensuring that the libertarian and anarchic spirit of the worldwide web is not circumscribed so that growth is prevented. I should not like any Government—ours, the Americans' or any other one—so to circumscribe the internet and e-commerce that growth is prevented. We need growth.

Deregulation

7. **Mr. Richard Page** (South-West Hertfordshire): How many regulations affecting business have been revoked by his Department since May 1997. [65197]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): Between 1 May 1997 and 31 December 1998, my Department revoked 16 statutory instruments affecting business and also simplified a further 16 statutory instruments affecting business.

Mr. Page: That is an appallingly low figure, and the Minister should be suitably ashamed of presenting it to the House. Is he aware that, when in opposition, his colleague—who has recently become a Treasury Minister, because of an unexplained and unexpected vacancy—berated my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) when he achieved more than 1,000 deregulations? The Minister now offers an appallingly low figure. Will he now go back to his officials and tell them: "I do not wish the Government to be so humiliated again. Get working on deregulation, so that when that hon. Member asks me that question again in a year—which he will do—I can give a really super answer, helping to take the burdens off the back of small business men and women"?

Before he answers that, I have a further question: how many regulations has his Department put on to the backs of small businesses?

Dr. Howells: I was going to ask how the hon. Gentleman—whose friendship I greatly value—could say that with a straight face, but he did not. The list of regulations passed by the Conservative Government between 1979 and 1996 reads like "War and Peace". I have not even got past the first chapter. They passed 45,000 regulations during that period. In the three years before they lost power in May 1997, they passed 10,000 new regulations. Since we came to office, we have introduced 2,700 new regulations. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.

I am not one of nature's regulators. I should like regulation to decline significantly in this country, but, by God, we have a mountain to climb to get there, because the Conservatives left an enormous avalanche of legislation for us to tackle.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I thank my hon. Friend for his reply and welcome him as the representative of the anarchist-libertarian wing of new Labour. Has he noticed that the number of regulations that the Labour Government have repealed corresponds exactly with the 16 Tory Back Benchers who have turned up on this historic day, when Question Time is taking place in the morning? Does that reflect their lack of interest in the subject or the fact that more than 200 of them have second jobs, directorships and consultancies and are out lining their pockets instead of being here doing their parliamentary business?

Dr. Howells: I can answer only a small part of that. I suspect that there is great confusion among the Conservatives about regulations because, clinically, they are still in denial about them.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The Minister has spoken about the need to simplify regulations. Will he undertake to simplify the working time regulations, which are the most complex and burdensome regulations imposed on British business in a generation? They have been much criticised by the chambers of commerce and are proving difficult to implement. Will he look at them again and come back with simpler regulations? Will he guarantee that, in future, he will always follow the advice of the better regulation task force, which also criticised those regulations? The Government prided themselves on setting up the unit, but was that not just a lot of rhetoric? Is not the reality that the regulations coming from this Government are more burdensome and complex than ever?

Dr. Howells: I have every confidence that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry will ensure that every regulation introduced by his unit will be good, necessary and relevant.

Post Office

8. **Mr. Bob Laxton** (Derby, North): When the Government intend to publish their White Paper on the future of the Post Office. [65198]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): My right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) said in his statement to the House on 7 December on the future of the Post Office that a White Paper would be published early in the new year. Work is proceeding with the intention of publishing the White Paper as soon as possible.

Mr. Laxton: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new job. The Post Office is a little disappointed that the White Paper has not already been published. The Dutch and German post offices have been gobbling up companies in Europe pretty rapidly. I very much welcome the Post Office's decision to buy into German Parcels. That will greatly assist its future in Europe. To be specific, will the White Paper allow the Post Office the greatest possible commercial freedom? Will the new regulator have sufficient powers to ensure that the Post Office improves on its excellent service to businesses and the community?

Mr. Byers: I thank my hon. Friend for his words of welcome. The Post Office is not disappointed with the time scale in the White Paper. It is closely involved in discussions about the White Paper and is fully aware of the issues that we wish to address. On 7 December, my predecessor made it very clear that we want a new future for the Post Office. We want to lift the cloud of uncertainty that was created by the previous Government and ensure that it is no longer starved of investment. We are in the process of doing that and the Post Office is already using its new freedoms. For example, it acquired German Parcels at the beginning of this year. The consumer will also benefit from the proposed cut in the price of a second-class stamp—the first cut in many years—which will be welcomed by tens of thousands of people who use second-class mail. This is the future for the Post Office. We are delivering on our promise and supporting the Post Office, instead of neglecting it as the Conservatives did.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new responsibilities. Will he explain why he thinks that taxpayers should continue to be involuntary risk-bearing shareholders in the Post Office? Will he also explain why he thinks it is in the interests of the Post Office that it should be denied access to the capital markets to allow it to participate in the consolidation of postal services around Europe to which the hon. Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) referred?

Mr. Byers: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words of welcome. As a former Treasury Minister, he will know very well that the financial regime under which the Post Office operated under the previous Government was—

Mr. Dorrell: Not as good as it could have been.

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We are now tackling those deficiencies. That is why we have restricted the external financing limits which ensured that the bulk of the profits made by the Post Office went back to the Treasury. We are now allowing the Post Office to keep a far bigger proportion of its profits so that it can invest in the future. Taxpayers have an interest because they are the consumers. We want a Post Office offering high-quality services at affordable prices and we now have a regime to achieve those objectives.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Front Bench and congratulate him on his involvement in negotiations regarding the Post Office in his previous role. Can he confirm that the recent acquisition of German Parcels and the circumstances surrounding it necessitated a degree of commercial confidentiality that is consistent with commercial freedom? Opposition Members must realise that the new Post Office will behave in a different way, but, at the

same time, there will be processes involving the regulator, which will entail a degree of accountability and transparency consistent with its new freedoms.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point, with which I agree. We need to put in place a proper system of liberalisation and tough regulation for the new Post Office. The White Paper will address those issues, but Opposition Members must acknowledge that, because we are in a new relationship with the Post Office, we shall need to respect commercial confidentiality; otherwise, we shall make the Post Office vulnerable to foreign competition. Opposition Members may want that, but we certainly do not. We want a Post Office that will be a partner in change, not the victim of change. That is what we want and we have now put in place the regime to ensure that it happens.

Energy Policy

9. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on the Government's energy policy. [65199]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The Government are committed to competition, and to an energy policy based on secure, diverse and sustainable energy supplies at competitive prices.

Mr. Paterson: The Secretary of State did not mention that the Government are committed to raising 10 per cent. of energy from renewable resources by 2010. If half that energy were to come from wind, 10,000 to 20,000 turbines would have to be built. The 800 that have been built—in areas such as the Shropshire-Wales border—are an environmental disaster and bitterly resented by locals. Contrary to the Secretary of State's statement, they generate energy at three to five times the cost of other sources. They are extraordinarily unreliable. They have to be closed down in freezing weather, when demand is at its peak—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must ask a question; otherwise, I will refer him to an Adjournment debate, as that sounds like a very good subject for such a debate.

Mr. Paterson: Will the Government abandon this foolish policy?

Mr. Byers: A long question deserves a short reply. A paper on renewables will be published by the Government shortly.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): In the review of energy policy, will my right hon. Friend consider the activities of the Coal Authority, particularly in regard to abandoned and disused mine shafts? Is he aware that the Coal Authority's records in this regard are notoriously unreliable? Will he therefore consider urgently what action the Coal Authority should take to make sure that its records are accurate and clearly show not only the siting, but the status and condition of the abandoned mine shafts?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which affects many communities up and down the country. The Government take the matter seriously and, as a matter of urgency, we will be asking the Coal Authority to review its procedures to ensure that accurate information is available, so it can plan accordingly.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): In congratulating the Secretary of State on his appointment, may I ask him to confirm that the motto of his Department will from henceforth be, "Let Byers beware"? Why have the Government sought on environmental grounds successively to increase the tax on fuel duty for motor vehicles, while simultaneously reducing the tax on domestic fuel, which pollutes the atmosphere as much as, or even more than, vehicle fuel?

Mr. Byers: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome. As far as fuel is concerned, we know that the Conservative Government sought to dramatically increase the rate of VAT.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Do not split infinitives.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman must be careful, otherwise someone will split his infinitives for him. There are many Labour Members who would gladly volunteer to do so. The hon. Gentleman is trying to divert me from the important political point that I was making. The previous Conservative Government put VAT on domestic fuel at 17 per cent. Even in opposition, we managed to defeat that and, in government, we were able to reduce VAT to 5 per cent. That has been welcomed by consumers, and we are looking at how we can ensure that, in terms of a proper, sustainable environmental policy, we can have fuel that is not costly—the right hon. Gentleman would like that—and within a safe and secure environmental policy.

Regional Start-ups

10. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): What measures he is planning to help new start-ups in the regions. [65200]

The Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry (Mr. Michael Wills): Support for start-ups is seen as making a significant contribution to economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness. The recent competitiveness White Paper set out a commitment for business link partnerships to provide sustained, tailored advice and support to innovative start-ups with real growth potential. Our target is that at least 10,000 businesses a year will receive such support by 2001.

Dr. Starkey: My hon. Friend will be aware that UK science is at the international forefront in biotechnology, but that there is a relatively poor take-up of biotechnology in start-ups of small firms in the UK, compared with the United States. The major advantage in the United States is the ready availability of venture capital for such biotechnology firms. What action are the Government taking to ensure that venture capital is readily available here in every region?

Mr. Wills: My hon. Friend draws attention to an important matter. It is crucial that start-ups, especially in

high technology, get access to the right sort of capital. The competitiveness White Paper set up plans to that end. We are setting up an enterprise fund worth £150 million over three years. There will be a national venture capital fund, which we are currently discussing with leading financial institutions. We also want to set up regional venture capital funds, and we will work with the regional development agencies to develop that proposal.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT (MILLENNIUM EXPERIENCE)

The Secretary of State was asked—

Corporate Sponsors

33. **Mr. Eric Forth** (Bromley and Chislehurst): If he will list the corporate sponsors of the millennium dome. [65225]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): Last November, the New Millennium Experience Company announced confirmed sponsorship of £120 million from Tesco, Manpower, BT, BSkyB, Marks and Spencer, Boots the Chemist, McDonald's, British Airways, GEC, British Aerospace, the Corporation of London, British Airports Authority and Camelot. In addition, Thames Water is funding the innovative grey water recycling facility at the dome. That is a fantastic achievement in anyone's books.

Mr. Forth: I welcome the Minister to this aspect of her responsibilities and thank her for her answer, which already shows an openness that we had come not to expect from her predecessor. May I urge her to go yet further and confirm that, henceforth, the secrecy that we came to expect—in retrospect, we can understand why it existed—will be swept aside, and she will share with the House and the country all aspects of the financing of the dome project, so that we can see that there is nothing hidden, nothing secret and nothing to be ashamed of, and, most importantly, that all the sponsorship is absolutely clean and above board?

Janet Anderson: We have always been very open about the project. I shall continue to be as open as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who always answered fully any questions raised in the House. The right hon. Gentleman would do his country better service if he would get behind the project and give it the support that it deserves.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): I welcome the list of sponsors. What sponsorship was in place when the Government took office in May 1997, and what would have happened to the dome if we had let that legacy stand? More importantly, what progress has been made on the spirit zone, and what sponsorship will be available to ensure that the dome celebrates the millennium in the way that was intended, as a religious festival marking 2,000 years since the birth of Christ?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. When the Government took over, no sponsorship whatever was in place. More than £120 million of sponsorship has now been committed to the millennium experience and the New Millennium Experience Company is well on the way to reaching its £150 million target. Good progress has also been made on the spirit zone, both in design and construction and in raising the necessary sponsorship.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I hope that you will forgive me, Madam Speaker, for remarking that this is an odd occasion: here we are at the butt end of Trade and Industry questions, and it is rather like an end-of-run panto in which the demon king, consumed in a puff of his own sulphur, has left the show for good.

I warmly and sincerely welcome the Minister to her new role as fairy godmother to the project. I wish her well in answering questions on it, even though she is not responsible for the project. She obviously is not a former flatmate of the Prime Minister, as one has to be a crony to get a top job. Will she make a new start and undertake to be open, frank and honest in all her dealings concerning the project, and to give it to us warts and all? Will she begin by telling us how many of the zones still have to be fully sponsored?

Janet Anderson: I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I said to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), that I wish that Conservative Members would get behind this unique national project. This country is rapidly becoming recognised internationally as the country of the millennium. Raising £150 million of private sector sponsorship is a considerable challenge, but no one has ever before decided to stage such a unique national event. I remind the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) that, when this Government took office, the previous Government had not raised one penny of private sector sponsorship for the project.

Mind Zone

34. **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): What plans he has for the Millennium Experience to celebrate the human capacity to think. [65226]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The mind zone, one of fourteen exhibits in the millennium experience dome, will celebrate the unique creativity of the human brain by exploring the nature of our senses and perceptions through traditional art and advanced technology.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and express my pleasure in welcoming her to her new duties. I am a member of the National Committee for Philosophy, a post which naturally carries no remuneration. Those functions that require recognition, such as the contribution that philosophers have made to our culture in the past thousand years, may be left out because some bodies are unable to get the high levels of sponsorship that will be needed to obtain space in the dome. Will my hon. Friend be receptive to representations

from professions such as philosophers and others to ensure that the contribution made by such people to our culture is given full expression in the dome, and that the dome is not a dumb dome, as some have suggested that it might be?

Janet Anderson: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are well aware of his expertise in this area and proud to have him as a colleague. We are always willing to meet anyone who has an interest in the dome. The mind zone will show how medical imaging technology allows us to follow the response of our brains to sensory input. Visitors will interact with advanced, intelligent robots in the robot zoo and enjoy a specially commissioned film showing images that challenge the very limits of our senses.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Is the hon. Lady aware that so much of the thought of the past millennium, and the creativity and achievements of people around the world, has been inspired by the Christian faith? In spite of her earlier and welcome answer, is she aware that many people feel that the millennium dome has been hijacked by new Labour to act as a party political launch pad, including much of the language and imagery? It is essential, when she advises her noble Friend who has taken responsibility for the millennium experience, that she tells him that the dome is not a party political launch pad but a celebration of the achievements of our nation in the past millennium while looking forward to the future.

Janet Anderson: I assure the right hon. Lady that we have never attempted to make the dome a party political launch pad. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, at a well-attended event held yesterday to explain what we are doing for the millennium, made it plain that the project was started by the Conservatives. If the right hon. Lady wishes to make cheap political points, I remind her that her right hon. Friend, Michael Heseltine—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I mean the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine). He has been involved in the project from the start. I hope that the right hon. Lady will get behind this unique national project, which is recognised internationally as a symbol of the millennium. She should give it her full support.

Dome (Maintenance Costs)

35. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What is the estimated annual cost of maintaining the fabric and structure of the dome. [65227]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The New Millennium Experience company estimates that the cost of necessary maintenance inspection work on the dome fabric and structure during 2000 to be about £30,000. Such regular inspections will help keep maintenance costs to a minimum.

Mr. Prentice: I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on taking up her new and challenging responsibilities. May I remind her that, although it seems like only yesterday, it was two months ago that the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) told us the dome would be with us for a quarter of a century?

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Well, he wasn't!

Mr. Prentice: I was not responsible for scripting that.

My hon. Friend has told us that £30,000 will be spent on the upkeep of the dome during 2000. Would it not be a good idea to spend a little more on the extra bit of paint that might extend the design life of the dome beyond 25 years, taking, perhaps, the Eiffel tower as an inspiration for what can be done?

Janet Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for taking the issue seriously, unlike Opposition Members. The lifetime of the dome's roof is estimated at 25 years, which is one reason why there is that cut-off. However, as the Prime Minister has said, the dome is too good to pull down, and we want to find a fitting use for it beyond 2000. The Deputy Prime Minister's Department is responsible for English Partnerships, and he has asked officials to work out proposals for the best mechanism by which to encourage and assess expressions of interest, including a timetable and criteria against which bids may be judged.

Business of the House

12.32 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 25 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill.

TUESDAY 26 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Tax Credits Bill.

WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition Day [4th Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on Terrorist Mutilations in Northern Ireland. Followed by a debate on the London Underground. Both debates will arise on opposition motions.

THURSDAY 28 JANUARY—Motions on The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order, The Social Security (Contributions) (Re-rating and National Insurance Fund Payments) Order and the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order.

FRIDAY 29 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting. The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the House of Lords Bill.

TUESDAY 2 FEBRUARY—Conclusion of Second reading of the House of Lords Bill.

WEDNESDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Until 2 o'clock there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition day [5th Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Motion on the Police Grant Report (England and Wales).

Motions on the English Revenue support Grant Reports.

FRIDAY 5 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for the business for next week, and for an indication of the business for the following week.

On the House of Lords Bill, may I ask—I hope for the last time—that the Government respect the convention that all the Committee stage of that constitutional Bill will be taken on the Floor of the House? The right hon. Lady has come to the altar on that point, but she has not yet said yes. Will she also explain who will answer parliamentary questions on constitutional issues, and when? May we have a debate, in Government time, on the White Paper published yesterday?

The right hon. Lady has announced a debate on the police grant for England and Wales, and she will be aware of widespread concern about the level of provision. Will she assure the House that we may have a full three-hour debate on that subject?

Can the right hon. Lady give the House the date for the Budget?

Can the right hon. Lady tell us the position on the constituency week in February, the notional date for which is fast approaching?

Finally, the right hon. Lady has announced two Opposition day debates. If one so-called Opposition party both deepens and broadens its co-operation with the Government—and there are more and more areas on which that party is in effect part of the Government—is it not time to reallocate Opposition days to a party that is not compromised in that way, and which will oppose the Government without pulling its punches?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman asks me about House of Lords reform. I can now give him an answer about the handling of the Bill, although I was not willing to do so before. The short and simple nature of the Bill enables me to say that we will take all of it on the Floor of the House, which will be for the convenience of the House.

The right hon. Gentleman should know that views differ in the House as to whether we are required to take all the Committee stages of all such Bills on the Floor, but this is such a short and simple measure that we certainly accept that it is for the convenience of the House to do so, although, for example, we thought it right to split the Greater London Authority Bill.

The Minister with responsibility for constitutional issues will answer questions on those issues, which means me on questions of House of Lords reform. As to when, it will be at the appropriate time. The right hon. Gentleman asked for a debate on the White Paper as such. As the House will appreciate, I have just announced a two-day Second Reading debate. Subject to the views of the Chair, some of those issues might well be raised then and we will certainly discuss the matter through the usual channels if it is thought that it needs to be considered further.

Similarly, the right hon. Gentleman asked for a longer debate on the police support grant and on various other issues. Again, that is a matter for discussion through the usual channels. I am not unfavourable to the idea of giving greater time to the police support grant debate and we can consider it. I cannot give him a date for the Budget—I will do so as soon as I can—nor can I add to what I told him about the constituency week in February. I understood his final remarks about Opposition days to be an opening in a general passage of arms about political matters, not a serious application to change such days.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Has there been any progress on the debate that I have been calling for on the treatment by National Westminster bank of its customers, in particular the Tanning Shop franchisee customers? Is my right hon. Friend in a position to join me in asking the Chairmen of the Select Committees on Treasury and on Trade and Industry to take evidence in joint session from the management of that bank—in particular, Mr. Robert Munn and Mr. Peter Stern, who know the truth about how shabbily NatWest has treated many of its customers nationally?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot accede to my hon. Friend's request for a debate, although he is right to say that he

has raised the matter on a number of occasions. He will know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a review of banking services in the pre-Budget report. My hon. Friend raises a particular case on behalf of his constituents and asks me to invite the Chairmen of two of our Select Committees—Treasury and Trade and Industry—to have a joint session on the matter. With the greatest possible respect, it is not for me to set the agenda for Select Committees. However, I am confident that if he contacts my hon. Friends who hold those posts, they will give him a sympathetic hearing.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I suggest to the Leader of the House that it would be somewhat bizarre if we could not extend the debate on the House of Lords Bill to wider consideration of House of Lords reform? I hope that that will be possible. Perhaps some discussions can take place through the usual channels to ensure that it is. Clearly, since all parties want the Bill to be a first step towards more comprehensive reform, it would be extraordinary if we were prevented from having such a discussion.

Is it the present intention of the Government in due course to put the fuller proposals for reform of the House of Lords to the people in a referendum? Do they intend to do so in this Parliament, if that can be achieved? Does the right hon. Lady agree that it would be curious if the House of Lords were subjected to effective reforms that made it more accountable, democratic and representative, but the House of Commons were not given that opportunity at the same time?

Mrs. Beckett: First, the hon. Gentleman asked me to give an indication of the handling of the debate. I was somewhat cautious in my response to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) earlier. The Government have provided time for a two-day debate, thus facilitating a very full debate which we hope will enable hon. Members to air several matters. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I am in no way seeking to fetter the discretion of the Chair in the difficult decisions that must be made.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether it was our intention to have a referendum, perhaps in this Parliament. We are in no way at the stage of announcing such conclusions to the House. On reflection he will probably agree that there may be a creative tension between those who want to see speedy progress on this matter and those who wish to insert a referendum into the process, since that in itself would have a legislative requirement, apart from any other.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman said that the outcome of the process might be to make the House of Lords more democratic and representative than this Chamber. I do not for a second accept that that could possibly be the outcome. It certainly could make the second Chamber have some tenuous link with democracy and representation of a kind that it certainly lacks now. If, however, his remarks were a reference to a perceived lack of legitimacy of this House because of our electoral system, that is not a view I share.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. After hearing the last two questions put to the Leader of the House I must remind hon. Members that we are asking about the business for next week. The use of this period is deteriorating and I take the opportunity of putting it on record that business questions must relate to next week's business. It is not an occasion to make long comments about personal or constituency cases. Nor should matters be raised that relate to the right hon. Lady's ministerial responsibilities as President of the Council, for which a separate question period is set aside. Hon. Members will be aware of that. Today, I expect brisk questions relating directly to next week's business. I know that I shall also get short responses from the Leader of the House, who is sympathetic to my approach on this matter.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): In view both of the publication today of the House of Lords Select Committee report and of next week's business on the future of the House of Lords, can my right hon. Friend tell the House whether there will be an early opportunity to discuss genetically modified foods, particularly given the concerns of those who wish to have the choice not to buy GM foods?

Mrs. Beckett: I welcome the Select Committee's report as a useful contribution to the debate. Not everyone will agree with it and I am not committing myself about the attitude that the Government will take. I am simply saying that anything that contributes to the debate is welcome. I fear that I cannot promise my hon. Friend an early debate on this matter, but we shall take her request into account.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): Will the right hon. Lady confirm that it is not too late to put into next week's business an urgent debate on the corruption of EC Commissioners? Her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister dismisses any criticism of the EC Commission by attributing to those who make it a desire to pull out of the whole show immediately, but enormous sums of taxpayers' money have been misappropriated by individual commissioners, in particular by the French commissioner Madame Cresson. It is to be hoped that in such a debate right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House would be rather less docile than those who followed the instructions of the Prime Minister in the European Parliament last week.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on that matter in the near future. Nor do I share the right hon. Gentleman's rationale for having such a debate. My perception is that the European Parliament and, indeed, representatives from many parties in that Parliament have expressed great concern and taken a tough line on fraud. Certainly this Government have done so. Those representatives emerge from last week's events with a strengthened means of scrutiny. I do not doubt that they will use those means and, if necessary, return to the subject.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): In view of Monday's Adjournment debate on sanctions against Iraq and Tuesday's ten-minute Bill on parliamentary approval of military strikes, could a Minister see Denis Halliday, the former United Nations co-ordinator, who happens to be in Britain on Tuesday? He resigned his job on principle because he disagreed with the policy on Baghdad.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) has invited

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all hon. Members to a meeting with Mr. Halliday on 26 January. I cannot know at this moment whether any of my ministerial colleagues will be able to meet him, but my hon. Friend is a classic example of how a Member's assiduity can obtain opportunities for debate on the Floor.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does the Leader of the House accept that the announced departure of the leader of the Liberal party, which causes us all such sadness, gives the House an opportunity urgently to consider the anomalous position, largely created by him, whereby he was attempting to be at the same time part of the Government and part of the Opposition? Is she aware that that is causing concern not only among Opposition Members but among senior Labour figures? Will she provide time in next week's business to sort the matter out once and for all and decide whether the Liberal Democrats are part of the Government or a serious Opposition party?

Mrs. Beckett: If I were a Conservative, I would be cautious about making remarks about a serious Opposition party, because if the Conservatives were judged on performance, they might find themselves in some difficulty. It is not the act of a serious Opposition Member of any party to veto private Members' Bills through frivolous activity, as the right hon. Gentleman did in the previous Session. I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the private affairs of any political party, no matter how dear the subject may be to the heart of many Members.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): Will the Leader of the House find time next week for a debate on the position of the textile industry, following the announcement by the American Government that tariffs are to be imposed on textiles produced in Britain for import to America? Is not that an important subject for debate next week?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern, which I know is shared. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate next week, other than the one that is taking place on Wednesday morning.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the Leader of the House pay attention to early-day motion 188, on the EU Commission, which requires urgent debate next week?

[*That this House deplores the failure of Socialist MEPs to support measures to protect taxpayers' money from fraud, preferring instead to protect members of the EU Commission accused of fraud and nepotism; and applauds the efforts of Conservative MEPs to hold certain Commissioners to account on behalf of the taxpayers of Europe.*]

Further to the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark), I hope that the right hon. Lady will also pay attention in planning next week's business to the widespread public disgust at the behaviour of 52 Labour Members of the European Parliament who did not have the courage of their convictions in pursuing their own motion. Would not that debate allow the Government to confirm that the behaviour of Edith Cresson does not accord with what we would expect of one of our Ministers?

Mrs. Beckett: I repeat that I will not be able to find time for a debate on that matter; nor do I share the hon. Gentleman's view of the premise for such a debate. There is a reform plan. We utterly condemn, as anyone must, any suggestion of fraud, corruption or incompetence and have supported measures to deal with them. As for the attempt to pretend that what happened resulted solely from the actions of Labour representatives in the European Parliament, he should know that members of his party saw the sense of our representatives' actions and voted with them.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The Prime Minister would like people to become middle class, which is difficult for those who do not have a job, house or, in some cases, a vote. The homeless normally fall into all three categories. Can we therefore have a debate next week on homelessness and particularly on the inability of the homeless to vote? That ability could be delivered quickly to homeless people, even though it is more difficult to achieve jobs and houses.

Mrs. Beckett: I certainly know of my hon. Friend's long campaign to encourage people to ensure that they have the opportunity to exercise their voting rights. It is a campaign that every hon. Member from every party should support. I appreciate that one of the effects of being homeless, among other damaging effects, is that someone can be disfranchised.

I hope that my hon. Friend is aware that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary currently has these matters under review. I think that the remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have been to some extent misreported. He is saying that we ought to move further and further away from seeing barriers of class as a barrier to advancement. I hope that all hon. Members support that.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Will the Leader of the House find time for an early debate on the defence industry? I am sure that she will understand that, as a Member of Parliament for a significant British Aerospace factory in a sector undergoing rapid restructuring, I was deeply concerned by the Prime Minister's comments yesterday at Question Time, in which he seemed to suggest that he would give primacy to European rather than British interests in the restructuring of the defence industry. Such a debate would enable Opposition Members to express their deep concern at the implications of that approach.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot find time next week for a debate on the defence industry. Nor do I share the hon. Gentleman's view that the Prime Minister said anything yesterday that caused the need for such a debate. My right hon. Friend perfectly properly takes a robust attitude to the defence of Britain's armed forces and to their exercising the role to which their professionalism and skill entitle them in international deliberations and events.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): Will my right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* Will my right

hon. Friend reconsider next week's business to include a whole day's debate on the transfer of functions order for the National Assembly for Wales? It is a document of enormous constitutional significance. The corresponding functions were transferred to Scotland by means of a schedule to the Scotland Bill and were therefore subject to scrutiny. Will my right hon. Friend give us an assurance that there will be proper scrutiny of the order and a full debate on it?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot undertake to give my hon. Friend such a day's debate in the near future. He raises some matters of considerable importance, and I undertake to draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friends.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The right hon. Lady has said that she cannot now announce the date of the Budget, but will she say that she is seeking an early date from the Chancellor of the Exchequer? She will know that yesterday's figures from a survey of independent forecasters predicted 0.6 per cent. growth in the United Kingdom this year compared to the Budget forecast of up to 1.5 per cent. So a central part of the pre-Budget report has been proved wrong already and it is urgent that the Chancellor come forward with a new economic forecast at an early date.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I am still not in a position to give the hon. Gentleman a date for the Budget. Nor is it part of my role to press for an early Budget. The timing of the Budget is a matter for consideration by the Government as a whole, and especially the Chancellor.

Nor does the case that the hon. Gentleman makes provide the justification for an early Budget. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister dealt with the point yesterday. One of the ways in which the Conservative party is making itself faintly ridiculous is, in the light of what happened not only in Asia and subsequently in Russia but in Brazil, to pretend that the Government are causing any problems that might beset the British economy.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): May we have a debate or at least a statement next week on the new guidelines issued on education action zones? The new guidelines are specifically designed to make it easier for businesses to take over and lead the zones, which presents the fairly nauseating prospect of companies such as McDonald's or the Edison project taking over the powers of local education authorities.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot provide time for an early debate on the matter. I understand the concerns that my hon. Friend raises about the guidelines. I feel confident that he will have a number of opportunities to raise those concerns. There are a number of examples of businesses with a strong local presence becoming involved and contributing to the local education system, and most hon. Members would not object to that.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate next week on the 175th anniversary of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution? Hon. Members on both sides of the House would like the opportunity to discuss the institution's good work. It is based on public subscription and is not funded by the taxpayer. It saves many lives in the seas around this country and southern Ireland. The headquarters are in Poole, and those of us with coastal constituencies would like an opportunity next week to express our appreciation for the good work that the institution does.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sure that the whole House shares the hon. Gentleman's words of commendation for the RNLI's work. I am sorry that I cannot find time for a debate next week. Had we had a little more notice, we might have looked for an opportunity to press for the matter to be touched on in some way. The whole House shares the congratulations and encouragement that the hon. Gentleman has offered. Perhaps there is no need for a debate and we can simply record our thanks and congratulations.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): In view of last week's decision by the new German Government to terminate their nuclear reprocessing contract with British Nuclear Fuels, the subsequent ministerial meetings this week, and the traditional culture of secrecy that surrounds all matters of nuclear power in this country, does my right hon. Friend agree that next week is the right time to debate the implications for the nuclear industry of the current question mark over reprocessing?

Mrs. Beckett: I can understand the concern that lies behind my hon. Friend's question and why he is pressing for an urgent debate. When a matter arises which clearly raises serious issues, it is always difficult to know when to press for a debate on it. I certainly cannot find time for one next week. Matters might not yet be sufficiently resolved for there to be as constructive a debate as my hon. Friend would wish. I feel confident, however, that he will use any opportunities available to him to continue to press the matter.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the right hon. Lady use her ingenuity to fit into next week's debate on the social security uprating the issue of long-term unemployment? The problem is that the long-term unemployed are claiming a lot of social security benefits. I have written to the Prime Minister pointing out that, despite the 70,000 people who are supposed to have got into some sort of scheme or back to work through the new deal, the long-term unemployment statistics published by the Government show that the number of unemployed 18 to 24-year-olds remains static, and the number of long-term unemployed whom the new deal is supposedly helping has risen by 46 per cent. in one category. The matter is of great urgency to all hon. Members and should be dealt with urgently.

Mrs. Beckett: I remind the hon. Gentleman that it is not for me to use my ingenuity to fit other issues into next week's debate; rather, it is for hon. Members to use their ingenuity, subject to the generosity of the Chair. The hon. Gentleman quotes figures on the unemployment record and some categories of unemployed. I must admit that I am not familiar with them, so I am not in a position to query them. My understanding of the overall position, on

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which I have seen a great many figures, is that it is steadily improving, although not, of course, as fast as all hon. Members would like.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): My right hon. Friend has announced a debate on transport in London next week. Can that be extended to include security at Heathrow airport in the light of yesterday's reports of further lapses in security? This is the third time in the past decade that lapses in security have been exposed. They put at risk not only my constituents but the whole travelling public.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that this matter has occurred before, as all hon. Members will recall. The Deputy Prime Minister has ordered an immediate and full investigation. He has also made it plain that tough action will be taken if security is breached, and that there will be a wider check of security procedures at other airports. However, although my hon. Friend is welcome to try, I suspect that it might test the Chair if he were he to attempt to work that matter into a debate on London Underground—unless he can tie it to Heathrow station.

Madam Speaker: Which I do not think the hon. Gentleman would be able to do.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): May we have a debate on the Government's energy policy? Commitments on Kyoto and on achieving the cheapest price of electricity possible for each consumer, and commitments to the Government's friends in the mining industry have, according to reports in *The Times* yesterday, run slap-bang into another policy dear to the Government's heart: the working time directive. Such a debate would allow the right hon. Lady's successor at the Department of Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who is just leaving the Chamber, to explain the policies that he put into practice.

Mrs. Beckett: I do not accept that there is a difficulty. The implementation of policy is always a balancing act. I also do not accept—nor, I am sure, does my right hon. Friend—that there is an inherent contradiction in the Government's approach to these matters. I fear that I cannot find time for a debate on the issue in the near future.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Can my right hon. Friend find time next week for an urgent debate on the London fire service and its funding? The service is threatened because of the budgetary crisis. In New Addington in Croydon it serves an isolated community with many young families and a history of fires. There have been cases of arson in local schools and in a local chemical factory. There is great concern, so can she consider finding time for such a debate?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot find time next week for a debate specifically on the fire service, but my hon. Friend will have noted that there is to be a debate on English revenue support grant orders the following week. He may be able to work it into that.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we have an early statement to clarify the Government's intentions on the handling of the Second Reading debate on the Bill to reform the House of Lords? Yesterday afternoon, the Leader of the House invoked the precedent of Dick Crossman in November 1968 to justify the fact that she, rather than her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, was making the statement on reform. Is she aware that, in the instance to which she referred during the last major legislation to reform the House of Lords, the Second Reading debate on the Bill was opened by the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson? In view of her admirable respect for precedent, will she guarantee that the Second Reading debate next Wednesday will be opened by the Prime Minister?

Mrs. Beckett: One should always respect precedent, but not necessarily be bound by it. In our exchanges yesterday, I was correcting misinformation given to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who I am sure did not intend to mislead the House when he referred to other precedents. It is 30 years since that debate was instigated by the then Prime Minister.

There are a variety of precedents concerning who has spoken in debates on this and other constitution reforms. If the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has looked at the record, he will know that in those days matters were handled differently between Prime Ministers and departmental Ministers. Most of the subsequent changes were introduced during the premiership of Baroness Thatcher, who now sits in the House of Lords. The hon. Gentleman is a great admirer of hers, so I am sure that he would not wish us to discard those precedents.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Will my right hon. Friend find time next week for a debate on the timing and details of the implementation of the recommendations of the Jenkins commission? This has been official Labour party policy since the time of the late John Smith, and it would give the Government a chance to show that they are in the business of honouring their manifesto promises.

Mrs. Beckett: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we are indeed in the business of honouring our manifesto promises. It is entirely possible that there will be a referendum on this matter before the end of this Parliament. I fear, however, that it will not be in this Session, so I cannot find time for a debate next week.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Leader of the House at least try to prevail on the Prime Minister to come to the House next week and make a statement on the recent announcement that the leader of the Liberal Democrats is to retire—and, in particular, tell us whether that retirement signifies the welcome demise of plots to replace our successful first-past-the-post electoral system with the outrageously undemocratic system of proportional representation, which has given the Green party in Germany control of the Foreign Ministry on the basis of less than 7 per cent. of electoral support?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I could not possibly encourage my right hon. Friend to come to the House to comment on the political affairs of another party. Indeed, I am sure that he would refuse to do so. As for the hon. Gentleman's other comments, no doubt we shall return to those matters during the months ahead.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): In your statement earlier today, Madam Speaker, you said that

business questions should relate solely to next week's business. Nowadays, business for the next two weeks is always announced, although the business for the second week is provisional. Do you intend to bar all questions about business for the second week?

Madam Speaker: No. My point is that Members should refer to business that is before us—business for next week, or for the week after. At present, Members are asking the Leader of the House questions that do not relate to business at all. That has been the habit in recent times. I am anxious for Members to discuss the business for the next week and for the week after, if the Leader of the House has announced it.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the right hon. Lady confirm that, during the debate on the House of Lords reform Bill, a Minister will open and close the debate on each day? Is that the intention? Will the right hon. Lady also try to ensure that the point about the White Paper is clarified in next week's business statement, so that we know whether we are debating just the Bill or both topics?

May I raise an important matter that relates directly to constitutional business? Will the right hon. Lady make a statement next week about the Government's intentions on the taking of questions on constitutional matters, which are at the forefront of their legislative programme? At present, in her capacity as Lord President, the right hon. Lady answers questions only once a month, sharing a quarter of an hour with the House of Commons Commission and sometimes being given less than 10 minutes. I am sure she agrees that is wholly inadequate for such a crucial issue. Can the Order Paper be rearranged; and will the right hon. Lady announce her intentions to the House so that constitutional questions are properly dealt with?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman asked me about the handling of a debate. All the matters that he raised can be examined through the usual channels. It is entirely possible that the debate will be opened and closed each day by a Minister, but if it is thought convenient to the House for fewer Front-Bench speeches to be made, that too can be considered. No firm conclusions have been reached, but the matter can be cleared up through the usual channels. The same applies to discussing the White Paper in the context of the debate.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his follow-up question. I was slightly puzzled as to what his right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) was getting at, but I understand now. Speaking off the cuff, I do not think it necessary for us to seek so much more time for questions on constitutional matters—I feel that the present structure provides enough opportunities for such matters to be raised if that is considered necessary—but I shall undertake to look at the matter again; it, too, can be considered through the usual channels.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): My right hon. Friend will know that the report on events following the murder of Stephen Lawrence may well be handed to the Home Secretary next week, or during the following week. The issue has implications for policing in London and in the country as a whole, and also for race relations. If the report is handed to the Home Secretary next week, will my right hon. Friend allow the fullest possible time for a debate, given the amount of concern expressed by several Members on both sides of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right that there is great concern among hon. Members on both sides of the House about that matter. I was not aware that the report might be with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary as early as my hon. Friend suggests, but I will draw his remarks to my right hon. Friend's attention.

I know that my hon. Friend will appreciate, as I am sure the whole House will, that it is a matter for consideration as to whether my right hon. Friend will wish to encourage a debate very early when the report has just been received and there has not been much time to consider it, or think it better to have the debate a little later when there has been more time to come to a mature view. Those are matters on which there is merit on both sides. As I say, I undertake to ensure that they are given consideration.

Points of Order

1.10 pm

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I wonder whether you could help Back-Bench Members. Last Thursday, we only got to Question 13. Today, we only got to Question 10, because we had long rambling questions and long rambling answers from those on the Treasury Bench.

Do you agree, Madam Speaker, that a good example could be set to the House? If Ministers do not know the answer to a question, instead of giving a long answer, which offers us every form of assistance short of help, they should do as Mr. Attlee would have done and simply say, "That is an interesting point. I will make a note of it." We could then get on to the next question. Progress is incredibly slow in the House, which is extremely frustrating to those of us on the humble Back Benches.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I am very concerned about the lack of progress at Question Time. He and others will recall that I have made more than one statement about that in the hope of guiding Members.

I watch the progress of questions and answers; I not only listen to them daily, but regularly look at the number of questions asked and answers given. I speak to those responsible because I am extremely concerned that many Back Benchers do not get an opportunity to ask their questions because they are not reached.

There are two reasons why we are not making progress. One is the length of answers given by Ministers at the Dispatch Box; the other is the length of questions from Opposition Front-Bench Members, as well as from all Back-Bench Members. I do not wish to embarrass Members by intervening too often, but I am going to have to when Members stand and give a long preamble before they actually come to the question. I reiterate that I am also concerned about long ministerial answers. I have also taken that up with those responsible.

Since the House came back in November, the position has deteriorated even more. Only this week, I have been working on the matter with those concerned in the hope that we shall make better progress. I am keen to support Back Benchers when they take the trouble to table questions to ensure that as many as possible are able to be called to ask them.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Yesterday, the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) raised a point of order in which he asked me to come to the House to apologise because I had suggested to the House that the 1983 Conservative manifesto did not contain a commitment to abolish the Greater London council. However, I had made no such statement. The previous day, I had asked the hon. Member for Croydon, South whether he would apologise if he found that the Conservative manifesto did not contain such an undertaking. I should like to put that correction on the record. I also suggest that the hon. Gentleman's point of order was an abuse of that procedure.

Madam Speaker: That seems to have sorted the record out, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman gave notice to the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) that he was raising the matter today. It is usual to do so.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Did you?

Mr. Davies: No, I did not. [HON. MEMBERS: "Disgraceful."] The hon. Member for Croydon, South did not give—

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that the matter has probably been resolved, but it is usual to give notice when invoking another Member in such an issue.

Orders of the Day

Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill

As amended (in the Standing Committee), considered.

New clause 1

ABOLITION OF EMERGENCY TREATMENT FEE

'.—Section 158 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 (Payment for emergency treatment of traffic casualties) shall cease to have effect.'.—*[Dr. Harris.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

1.14 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

In previous debates on the Bill, we have heard the Government boast of the abolition of the emergency treatment fee as it applies to hospitals. The Liberal Democrats strongly support that on the basis that the fee was bureaucratic and on the basis of the Government's further justifications for the move, which are that it is offensive to patients arriving in hospital to be asked to pay a fee and that the amount raised does not compensate for the bureaucratic nightmare of collecting it.

The Bill, in its current form, is inadequate because it does not remove the emergency treatment fee as chargeable by general practitioners. Liberal Democrats see hardly any difference between the bureaucracy involved in collecting the general practitioner emergency treatment fee and that involved in collecting the hospital emergency treatment fee. There is also very little difference between the difficulties of approaching people who may have been injured in an accident, albeit always the driver in the case of the GP fee, and patients arriving in hospital for treatment following a road traffic accident. There is certainly no difference in the lack of information about whether it is worth while for the fee to be collected by front-line health service staff.

I wonder whether the Government, even at this late stage, will consider accepting the new clause on the basis that it fits in with the rationale of their original motives in the Bill.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman is seeking to remove the right of independent contractors—GPs—to claim the emergency treatment fee. Has the hon. Gentleman sought the views of the British Medical Association on this matter and what opinion has it expressed to him?

Dr. Harris: I intend to deal with those points during my presentation of the rationale behind this new clause.

Two questions need to be answered by those proposing the new clause. First, should GPs receive a fee for the treatment given and, secondly, if they do, should that come direct from an individual patient? General practitioners receive a fee for giving contraceptive advice. That fee comes not from the person to whom they have given the advice but from the health authority and it is in addition to their capitation fee. They are also rewarded for meeting screening targets. The normal way for GPs to be reimbursed, other than through their capitation fee, is through an item-of-service claim.

General practitioners are used to claiming from health authorities for specific items of service. Those proposing this new clause are not suggesting that GPs should not be reimbursed for their time, but that the current method is discriminatory because, in the first instance, GPs must approach a patient or even a third party for the fee. That does not fit in with the current arrangements for GP reimbursement. I can assure the Minister that, if an alternative mechanism of claiming for a GP's time and effort in a roadside attendance can be arranged through regulation, no GP need be out of pocket.

In case the Minister is not aware of this, I shall remind him of the difficulties that GPs face currently when collecting the fee. I asked the BMA for its view on the collectability of the fee and, in the first instance, it could not find any GP who regularly made an effort to collect it. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), who is a practising GP, although on a part-time basis because of his onerous parliamentary duties, said that during his time as a GP, he has never found it worth the effort to collect the fee. He said that he does know some people who do put in the effort, but they question whether it is worth while.

If I explain the procedure that GPs have to follow to collect the fee, the House will begin to see why it is not worth retaining, even if there were not strong arguments for the principle being wrong. The BMA has produced a guidance sheet for GP members on the Road Traffic Act 1988 emergency treatment fee. Section 158 of that Act applies and that is what the new clause would abolish. The guidance says:

"Under the Road Traffic Act 1988 doctors may generally claim a fee for providing emergency medical or surgical treatment to a person suffering bodily and/or fatal injury arising out of the use of a motor vehicle on a public highway.

A fee of £21.30 may be claimed for rendering treatment to an individual involved in a road traffic accident; and a fee of 41p may be claimed for each complete mile and additional part of a mile for any distance in excess of two miles which a practitioner must travel in order to provide the emergency treatment.

The payment may be claimed by any doctor whenever he or she is the first person to provide treatment.

The person who is using the vehicle at the time the event occurred out of which the bodily injury arose is the person responsible for the payment of the practitioner's fee."

We therefore have a situation in which GPs are approaching drivers of vehicles who may or may not have been injured—presumably they have survived—to ask for 41p per mile, perhaps after quickly hammering out the figures on a calculator. Such a situation is highly inappropriate, as the Government have recognised elsewhere in the Bill by abolishing the hospital emergency treatment fee.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): The hon. Gentleman is making a mountain out of a molehill. As a personal injury solicitor, I have had to deal with cases on behalf of accident victims many times, and it was a straightforward matter. If a claim is made, the docket is passed to a solicitor, who will either pass it to the driver's insurers or claim it back from the other insurance company. It is a

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

very straightforward process that is easily administered. Sometimes, the victim will pay out the fee and collect it back. I do not see what all the fuss is about.

Dr. Harris: Lawyers involved in processes in which they are paid always claim that the process is smooth and easy. If the hon. Gentleman will be patient, I shall explain the advice that the BMA gives to its doctors on how to claim the fee, with or without the services of the legal profession. I should say that I know of no solicitor who would charge a lower fee. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is particularly generous—which is why he is no longer practising—in being prepared to do such work for less than the £21.30 plus 41p per complete mile in excess of two miles, assuming that a doctor is the first person to reach an accident. Another invidious principle is the requirement to work out who is the first doctor on the scene, and therefore who can claim the fee. If the hon. Gentleman is patient, I shall explain the process as GPs see it.

The BMA advice continues:

"Practitioners should take the following steps to recover their fees:

(i) An oral request may be made to the person who was using the vehicle at the time of the occurrence which led to the provision of the emergency treatment."

That presumes that the person is alive, conscious and able to hear such an oral request. I suspect that any GP who pauses at the scene of an accident to make such a request is being forced by the current regulations—if he or she is obeying them—to put secondary considerations before his or her duty of care to patients.

The advice goes on to say that, if an oral request is not made,

"A written request must be made to the above-defined person. This request must be served upon that person within seven days from when emergency treatment was given. It must be signed by the claimant, stating his name and address, the circumstances in which the emergency treatment was effected, and that the claimant was the first person to provide such emergency treatment. The request may be served by delivering it to the person who was using the vehicle, or by sending it by recorded delivery addressed to him/her at his/her usual or last-known address."

The amount of administration that such a process involves for a GP, or for his or her staff, makes it not worth while to collect the fee. A greater consideration is the offence that might be caused to a person in hospital who receives such a request within seven days of an accident. Nothing could be better calculated to damage doctor-patient relationships.

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Dr. Harris: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will offer more legal advice.

Mr. Dismore: It is all very well hearing about such situations in theory, but, in practice, such situations do not occur. A docket is sent in, and it is paid. What is all the fuss about? The BMA may have established a long and complicated procedure, but such situations are dealt with very differently in reality.

Dr. Harris: I question that. I have asked the BMA what action GPs must take to collect the fee. I should prefer to believe the BMA and former colleagues of mine about the advice given by the BMA than to believe the advice of a solicitor who may or may not be involved in the case. It depends on whether GP practices have a contract with a local firm of solicitors.

On many occasions, I have heard the Secretary of State call for less NHS time and money to be spent on legal fees and more on patient care. The interventions of the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) suggest that he would like that reversed and thinks that every GP should have a contract with a local firm of solicitors to maximise their income. That may be good for solicitors, but it is not good for general practitioners and it certainly is not good for patients, who, directly or indirectly, are on the receiving end of the demands for payment.

The guidance given to doctors under existing legislation suggests that they must approach an accident victim within seven days of an accident to ask for the money. The £21.30 fee has not been raised since the introduction of the provision in 1988, but it is still a significant sum. The measure is highly regressive because it is a charge made to patients. It is offensive to them in principle and because of the time scale.

The GP may well not know who the driver was. It is not the first question that a doctor at the scene of an accident asks and it may not even be the last. The guidance helpfully goes on to explain:

"When a practitioner experiences difficulty in ascertaining the name and address of the person who was using the vehicle, s/he should make application to the appropriate chief constable."

That is astonishing advice to give busy front-line staff. It continues:

"In these circumstances this official is required by the Act to supply the practitioner with any information at his/her disposal as to the identification marks of any motor vehicle which the practitioner alleges to be a vehicle out of the use of which the bodily injury arose, and as to the identity and address of the person who was using it at that time."

That is overly bureaucratic. It is a waste of time and energy for the front-line staff in the health service. Chief constables and their officers have better things to do than to chase £21.30 fees across counties, across police authorities and across the country to reimburse GPs for roadside advice given. I believe that in their heart of hearts, the Minister and the other Labour Member present—Labour Members, I should say, because I see the Whip as well—know that it is nonsense. It would be easier and more logical for them to accept the new clause. We should be happy to support them if they did. I hope to hear specific reasons from the Minister why that cannot be done.

The BMA advice goes on:

"The fees payable under the Act are recoverable by court proceedings as if they were a simple contract debt due from the person who was using the vehicle to the practitioner rendering service."

That may be why lawyers are so interested in the retention of the measure. If no money comes forward, there is more work for solicitors.

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Dr. Harris: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I shall let him make his comments when I have finished this point.

The guidance goes on:

"However, in the event of a doctor being unable to obtain this fee, s/he may claim an ordinary 'Emergency Treatment Fee' from the relevant health authority (as covered by paragraph 33.8 of the Statement of fees and allowances)."

That means that after the general practitioner has gone through all those hoops without making progress and all that time and money has been wasted, there is provision to claim an ordinary fee for treatment from the health authority, just as a GP would for a patient who was not on his list but needed urgent and necessary treatment. Surely the Government can accept the new clause and recognise that the usual way to provide for such a fee is for doctors to be able to claim it back from the health authority without going through such hoops.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman is not reflecting reality. He has had a few pot-shots at lawyers. No lawyer will ever get rich on this fee. In 20 years in practice, I have never known a GP sue a victim to get the money back. It is just an extra line to add to the column of calculations. I have never charged anyone for it and I do not know anyone who has.

Dr. Harris: That adds to the force of my argument. No one benefits from the regulations. I was being charitable to the Government, who want to retain the charge, by supposing that there might be some group of professionals lobbying for the retention of the system. I do not blame GPs for wanting to retain the income, but they can do that through item-of-service claims from the health authority. If lawyers are not getting rich on it, patients find it offensive, GPs find it hardly worth the trouble and health authorities eventually have to pick up the tab, that is the definition of a bad law. Bad laws are repealed when a suitable legislative opportunity arises and the Minister must accept that this is such an opportunity. I am simply asking the Government to accept new clause 1, either here or in another place.

1.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Can my hon. Friend tell the House what percentage of the total revenue value is collected under present arrangements? Another argument in support of his proposition that a bad law is one that practically nobody uses is the fact that most people do not avail themselves of the legislation.

Dr. Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Indeed, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who cannot be here today, asked that question in Committee. The Minister replied that he did not know how much money was collected and said that the

"information . . . is not collected centrally"

and acknowledged that that was a familiar refrain. Many of us consider it to be a euphemism for saying that the information is not collected deliberately.

If the Government were able to ascertain by means of a simple survey of a random sample the sum of money that was collected by GPs, I expect that they would find that it was precious little. I am sure that health authorities have accounts of how much they dole out under the emergency treatment provision, although the road traffic cases would have to be separated from the rest.

I accept that the information is impossible to obtain, except by means of survey, but all the evidence so far suggests that it is hardly collected. Even if the fee were to raise a substantial sum, the Liberal Democrats would still consider it inappropriate. The fact that it offends patients and is a direct charge on drivers who may be patients for NHS care is sufficient reason for that charge to be abolished, just as the Government propose to abolish the hospital emergency treatment fee.

The Minister said in Committee:

"we are removing the right of NHS hospitals to collect the emergency treatment fee. It is right that we do that because it is a nightmare to collect. Front-line NHS staff are involved in recovering charges, which is not appropriate; the fee is set at a level that calls into question its worth; and we sympathise with the plight of some drivers who are faced with a bill for treatment."

—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 12 January 1999; c. 65-6.]

There is no difference between the GP emergency treatment fee and the hospital one. Indeed, hospitals could arrange for solicitors to act on their behalf. I did not notice the hon. Member for Hendon proposing on Second Reading or in Committee that hospitals could employ solicitors. What applies to GPs should also apply to hospitals. As the Minister pointed out, the only difference is that GPs are independent contractors. I accept that, but there is still a provision for those independent contractors to receive the fees to which they are entitled.

Will the Minister consider accepting the new clause? Ultimately its implementation will cost nothing as the fee can be collected by health authorities. The new clause would fulfil what I believe to be the intentions of those who drafted the Bill and avoid offending drivers and patients who are asked to pay directly that small but significant fee to the NHS.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The Opposition support the new clause, as it is identical to the one tabled in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who sadly is unable to be here today. He sends his apologies, as he is attending the funeral of His Grace the Duke of Rutland.

The issue was debated extensively in Committee, but was not voted on owing to some confusion over the interrelationship between new clause 1 and clause 18 of the Bill. I understand that it has now been established that new clause 1 stands alone, and can be considered alone today.

As the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said, all parties to the discussion recognise that the emergency treatment fee has caused disproportionate costs to those collecting it and distress to those from whom it is collected. The previous Government made it clear that it was their intention to abolish the emergency treatment fee as soon as a convenient legislative opportunity arose. It was not a burning issue—more of a tidying-up exercise. This Bill is such an opportunity.

The Minister's immediate predecessor—now the Chief Secretary to the Treasury—referred to the charge as a "sick tax" and a "tax on accidents". Fortunately for the right hon. Gentleman, fate intervened to prevent the Committee from hearing his explanation of the retention of what my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton has described as a "fag-end" of a charge.

[Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge)]

The Minister has indicated in Committee that his motivation for retaining the charge is essentially permissive, and that he seeks to leave it to individual GPs to decide whether or not it is worth collecting the charge. That runs the risk of different practices being adopted in different places, and of public confusion being generated. The Minister will agree that concern about different treatment of similar cases is one of the consistent themes of the debate about the NHS.

At £21.30, the charge is probably irrelevant to most GPs, but it is also insulting. Either they are expected to attend accidents as part of their contracted NHS work—and should, as the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon said, be suitably rewarded by the NHS for that work—or, if that work is viewed as independent and outside the NHS GP contract, they should be able to levy a charge that reflects the real contribution that they make at the incident. We should bear it in mind that, for the most part, the patients are not the GP's own patients but passing strangers, and that the GP has happened to be the first person available at the scene.

The Minister and the House may recall a case that was widely reported in the press a few months ago, in which a doctor on an American Airlines flight rendered life-saving assistance to another passenger, and sent the airline a bill for £240 which the airline refused to pay. The doctor, in a much-publicised case, sued the airline in London for payment of his bill. The public attitude at the time was that the airline's compensation to the doctor—a bottle of champagne, which probably had about the value of the £21.30 charge that we are talking about—was wholly inappropriate and insulting in the circumstances of a life-saving intervention. It was widely thought to be a mean recompense for the work that he had done.

The Minister has presented the retention of the emergency treatment fee as an opportunity for GPs—as essentially a permissive measure, allowing GPs to charge the fee. However, is it not in fact essentially restrictive in its operation? Does not the emergency treatment fee define the amount that a GP—a private contractor—is able to charge for attending a road accident, and set that amount at an artificially low level?

If the levying of a charge by a GP at the scene of an accident is to be seen as an act of private medicine—something that the GP carries out outside the terms of his NHS contract—the charge is limiting, and too low. If, on the other hand, it is to be seen as part of a GP's NHS duties, it is very important that the application of the emergency treatment fee, and the charging of it to patients, should be universal, because it will rightly lead to public discontent if people in the same situation are treated in different ways on different occasions.

The emergency treatment charge, and the cost and distress caused by its collection, can no longer be justified by the same logic that the Government have used to argue for the abolition of the charge in hospitals. It is a fag-end of a charge and no longer has any constructive use in the context of the rest of the Bill.

Mr. Hutton: We discussed this aspect of the Bill extensively in Committee. Most of the arguments that we have heard today were substantially rehearsed then. I made it clear in Committee that I had some sympathy with the arguments but, for the reasons that I gave then, and which I will briefly rehearse again today, I will invite the House to reject the new clause if the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) forces a Division.

I must correct one or two misunderstandings that have arisen today. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon implied that the emergency treatment fee was last increased in 1988; that is not the case—I am sure that it was merely a slip on his part—as it was last increased in 1995 by the previous Government. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said that they intended to abolish it—unfortunately, they never got round to doing it, although they had 18 years in which to have a fist at it—but I understand that, far from the position being as the hon. Gentleman said, Ministers in the previous Administration decided ultimately not to abolish it. That might be food for thought for the hon. Gentleman when he considers whether his hon. Friends should support the new clause.

I want to re-emphasise the fact that we have received no representations at all from the medical profession asking us to remove the right to claim the emergency treatment fee. The failure of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon to tell the House the result of his consultation with the medical profession was conspicuous. I asked him whether it had expressed a view to him about whether the emergency treatment fee should be abolished. I understand its position to be that it wants the right to claim the fee to be retained in the legislation.

As a general principle of how we legislate, I am not sure that it is a terribly good idea to introduce changes at this stage of a Bill's progress without consulting the relevant people—in this case, the medical profession—in the way that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon implied that he had.

Dr. Harris: I made it clear at the beginning of my speech that we were seeking to abolish not the right of general practitioners to claim the fee but the provision whereby they have to approach the patient, whether directly or through a solicitor. That is crucial. The general practitioners to whom I spoke—at least one of whom is present in the House—would welcome the opportunity to claim the fee through the health authority, in the normal way, and not directly from the patient.

Mr. Hutton: I will come to that point in a minute, but we should be quite clear that the hon. Gentleman and his supporters, without having first sought the views of the medical profession, are proposing to remove from general practitioners the right to claim the fee. As I understand it, the profession's views are clear: it wants to retain the option to claim an emergency treatment fee. He is proposing a change in the law that does not command the support of the medical profession, to whose views he has turned only very late in the day. That is not a scientific or appropriate way in which to progress the argument.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister appears to be allowing the medical profession to dictate the legislative agenda. I will be very interested to see whether that deference continues when we consider the NHS Bill later in the Session.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman is perhaps reading more into my remarks than he should. I am saying that

the Liberal Democrats are proposing a change in the law that they have not trailed in advance with the medical profession and on which they have not sought its views. The point I am making is that it is appropriate, when the law is being changed, to consult properly those parties who will be affected by the change. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon has not done that on this occasion and that is another reason why I will urge my hon. Friends to reject the new clause.

1.45 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Minister is trying to use an answer that is not the substantive answer as a defence to the proposition made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). My hon. Friend's case has two elements, the most important of which is that it is inappropriate for somebody to seek the fee from the victim at the roadside, or later through solicitors. What would be the Minister's view if the proposition were simply that a different method of collecting the money for the service were used? For example, the health authority could be asked for payment rather than the person affected directly.

Mr. Hutton: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, that is a possible option. It was raised by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon and I shall try to deal with the points that he raised in a minute. We have considered the issue carefully and the Department has received approaches from various representative bodies. We know that general practitioners continue to want the right to collect the fee as independent contractors, if they consider collection worthwhile in terms of effort and the effect on those from whom the fee is claimed. We are not minded to remove a right that has belonged to GPs since 1934.

It was suggested in Committee that if collecting the emergency treatment fee were a problem for hospitals, that must also be true for GPs and independent doctors. We have checked that point. We also received no representations from independent doctors on the emergency treatment fee, other than ones wishing to see it remain. Indeed, some representations suggested that it should be increased. We have not received any representations from the profession asking us to abolish the right to claim the emergency treatment fee.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Can the Minister say how many independent contractors have made those representations? I am not surprised that we have not seen massive numbers of GPs calling for the abolition of the charge, because most GPs do not claim it or even carry the paperwork to claim it. It is against the ethos of most people working in primary care in the health service.

Mr. Hutton: I wish to correct one misunderstanding held by the hon. Gentleman. The right to collect the emergency treatment fee is not limited to GPs in the national health service but is, in theory, available to any legally qualified medical practitioner, whether he has a contract with the national health service or not. I said earlier that I had some sympathy with the arguments made by the Liberal Democrats, but the profession has not made representations to the Government for such a change.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Answer the question.

Mr. Hutton: I have answered the question. I have repeatedly made it clear to the House that no representations have been made asking Ministers to abolish the emergency treatment fee. Those members of the profession whom we have consulted want to retain the right as an option.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon also raised the issue of the impact of the change on the national health service's budget. Although we are able to recover the loss of income in the hospital sector through the new tariff, if the emergency treatment fee were scrapped for GPs, health authorities would have to meet the costs in every case. There is no method to recoup the lost income in that situation. The new clause would impose an additional, unquantifiable financial burden on the national health service, and the Liberal Democrats have not told us where the additional resources to pay for that would come from. I have some sympathy with the argument of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon, but for the reasons that I have advanced, today and in Committee, I shall urge my hon. Friends to reject the new clause.

Dr. Harris: That answer is wholly unsatisfactory for a series of reasons, and I have to press the Minister further. Although these points were discussed in Committee, the extra information that the Minister has given has been much less satisfactory than that given in Committee.

It is not the job of an Opposition party to consult on legislative opportunities. If we were to be given some civil service time, we could do a poll within a few days, and certainly well before the Bill completes its proceedings here and in the other place. Our question would not be the Minister's, which is, "Do general practitioners want to retain the right to receive income for this item of service?" We would ask, "Do GPs wish to retain the right to receive income from individual patients rather than claiming it back from the health authority?"

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Ministers confuse the situation further by saying that they want to keep the option. They may not want to use the option, but they want to keep it. Out-patients lying in the street will not know as a general practitioner approaches whether or not that GP plans to use the option. There will be random charges on people depending on who is their GP.

Dr. Harris: That is an important point. In the last part of what the Minister said, he stated that switching the claim from patient to health authority would increase costs on health authorities. If he says that that cost would be unquantifiable, he must accept that there is currently an unquantifiable direct cost on patients. The difference between the situation that he envisages and the current situation is that patients pay the difference. The unquantifiable cost is put directly on patients.

In making his point, the Minister concedes my other point: doctors do not mind where the income comes from. In fact, doctors would largely object, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight, to claiming the money directly, or through a solicitor, from the patient.

Dr. Peter Brand: There is some confusion about emergency treatment and fees for road accidents. There is a perfectly respectable way in which to pay GPs for providing emergency treatment to people other than their own patients. Most GPs accept that they have an

[Dr. Peter Brand]

obligation to patients on their own list and on the lists of their partnership. The national health service is there to provide all necessary treatment.

When the need arises for a doctor to give emergency help to someone else's patients, the GP can, under every circumstance except that of a road traffic accident, make a perfectly proper claim to the NHS through his or her health authority. We urge the Minister to remove the limitation on emergency treatment—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman is making a speech rather than an intervention.

Dr. Harris: I understood my hon. Friend's point although it was curtailed. If he feels that I did not, I should be happy to hear him make a speech.

At present, the retention of the provision allowing general practitioners to claim a fee directly from the patient makes a difference only to those patients already on the relevant GP's list. If the patient is not on the GP's list, the general trend is to claim an emergency treatment fee from the health authority. The law forces the GP to make an extra claim only on those patients who have a relationship with that doctor. Nothing is so calculated to damage the doctor-patient relationship as people on a GP's list being asked by their doctor for an additional treatment fee for treatment outside the surgery in a car crash.

The Minister has not said how many doctors have written, of their own volition, to say that they want to retain the option to reclaim the fee. The question should be whether doctors want to retain the fee from the patient, not the health authority. Will the Minister quantify the representations that he has had, and, if possible, will he place them in the Library before the Bill goes to the other place?

It is the Government's duty to ask questions of the profession. The key question is whether GPs think it appropriate to have the power to collect the money directly from the patient.

The Liberal Democrats believe that progress can be made on health service provision even in the face of opposition from doctors. The Minister put a most un-Bevanite concept to the House when he said that if an unquantified number of doctors object to the way in which they are paid, no legislative progress can be made. We Liberal Democrats do not accept that concept. As the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) hinted, this Government have a tradition of caving in to general practitioner vested interests, for example, on the composition of primary care groups and a number of other issues.

If the question were put in the way that I suggested, I do not believe that the medical profession would object or, even if it did, that the Government should not legislate. After all, hospitals were not consulted on whether their emergency treatment fees should be abolished and they are so strapped for cash that I am sure that they would want to claim that extra income if they thought it worth while.

I shall hone down my questions for the Minister. How many responses to the consultation were received? Will he place them in the Library, so that we can see them? Will he ask the question correctly before the Bill ends its progress in another place? Does he agree that, regardless of the view of the medical profession, if the policy is deemed to be right and in the patient's interests, he should follow it?

Finally, what is the view of patients? That question remains unanswered, I suspect because it was not asked. It is a simple matter for the Minister to ask the Patients Association whether patients should be liable to pay a general practitioner for NHS treatment within seven days in an emergency situation.

I regret that the Minister's reply did not satisfy me. He placed the burden of legislation on the Liberal Democrats, which we would be more than willing to accept if the Government were prepared to ask us for legislative ideas outside the House. The Government are capable of undertaking those consultations, finding the answers and considering the principle of the charging mechanism. I urge the Minister to come back with more encouraging comments.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We want to bring this matter to an early conclusion. I hoped that the Minister would respond positively to my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon. I shall add one point and, if we still receive no response from the Minister, I think both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats will have to press the matter, because we should have had a concession.

The Minister is new to his post, but he gave some of the weakest arguments in defence of the Government's position that I have ever heard during debates on health service legislation. He does not have the figures and he did not say that the change would bring in a large amount of revenue for the health service. Nor did he say that it would be in the patients' interests. All he said was that the provision gives an option, which virtually no one uses, to collect some money, which is probably not very much. That is no way to run the health service. If we were talking about the Government forgoing billions of pounds, I could understand it, but we are not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), who has regular experience of these matters, pointed out how general practitioners in the health service reclaim fees for work that they do that is over and above work for their patients and their practice. In a rationed, streamlined and intelligent health service for the next century, what on earth is the argument for having one system to reclaim money for all sorts of activities, and a different system—which most GPs do not want to use because they consider it embarrassing and unethical—to reclaim money for one small category of people for one sort of work that GPs do? There is no logic to such a system. If we are trying to reduce the burden of bureaucracy on my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight, his wife and other practitioners in the health service, for heaven's sake let us have one system, which will allow one piece of paperwork whereby one collects money in one way at one time and reduces the charges to the rest of the system.

Unless the Minister gives the House some comfort, we will not only force the new clause to a vote now, but we will be obliged to oppose the Bill on Third Reading because the Government's position has no logic. Also, we will ask our colleagues in the other place, where the

Government do not yet have a majority, to ensure that common sense prevails. If we cannot get common sense from Ministers in this House perhaps, before the consistutional changes up the Corridor, there will have to be another Government defeat in the Lords, in the interests of the patients of the British national health service.

Dr. Harris: I should like to sum up because there are now more Labour Members in the Chamber than before. I wish to make it clear to the Government that it is because of their motives and words that we shall press the new clause to a Division. As the Minister said in Committee, the money is a nightmare to collect. Front-line staff are involved in recovering charges. If Government policy is dictated by what is acceptable to GPs, today's announcement by the General Medical Services Committee on the Government's outrageous rationing decisions will give the Government serious pause for thought. On that note, I commend new clause 1 to the House.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 28, Noes 208.

Division No. 43] **[2 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Tyler, Paul
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. Colin Breed.

NOES

Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rooker, Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N

White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

New clause 2

DUTY OF INSURERS TO SUBMIT ANNUAL REPORT TO PARLIAMENT

'It shall be the duty of any person liable to pay a charge to the Secretary of State under section 1 to submit by 30th June in each year following the passing of this Act a report to each House of Parliament, stating in respect of the preceding calendar year—

(a) the total of any such payments made to the Secretary of State, and

(b) the effect, if any, of making those payments on the cost to that person's customers of purchasing motor insurance.'.—*[Dr. Harris.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Dr. Harris: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss new clause 3—*Secretary of State's report on payments made under the Act*—

'.—The Secretary of State shall submit a report to each House of Parliament by 30th June in each year following the passing of this Act stating in respect of the preceding financial year the total of any payments made to him under the provisions of this Act.'.

Dr. Harris: The new clause would open up the legislation to the wider public so that its effects as a whole are explicit. The Minister and the House may know from the Second Reading debate that we are opposed to the Bill in principle because we believe that it surreptitiously introduces indirect charging of patients for NHS services. It is clear that, if the Bill became an Act, car insurance premiums would increase to cover the money that insurers would have to pay to the NHS for trauma treatment of third parties injured in road traffic accidents. We oppose that, and on Second Reading we made clear the reasons for our opposition.

New clause 2 sets out to bring to the attention of the House and to the public at large the effect of indirect charging of patients through their insurance. It creates a duty on insurance companies liable for the charge to present to each House of Parliament by 30 June each year a report stating in respect of the preceding calendar year, first, the total of any payments made to the Secretary of State and, secondly any effect of making those payments on the costs to their customers of purchasing motor insurance.

There has been a great deal of debate about how much car insurance premiums will rise as a result of the Bill. It must be noted that the debate has been about not whether premiums will rise but how much they will rise. We have had various estimates. The Department of Health is quoted in a House of Commons Library research paper as saying that every insurance premium would

"increase by £6 to £9."

The Association of British Insurers says on page 1 of its newsletter No. 28 from December 1998 that the Bill will "lead to premium increases." The Automobile Association is quoted on page 17 of the Library research paper as saying that the Bill would have the effect of

"adding around £10 to the cost of the average £260 annual motor policy."

The Independent said in December 1997 that the

"NHS bill may put £20 on car premiums".

It is not disputed that the Bill will lead to an increase. The figures are all within the same ball park.

The Minister may argue that the Bill should not lead to an increase in car insurance premiums because hospitals already have the power to charge the insurers of third parties injured in road traffic accidents, but they do not do so because of the bureaucratic difficulties involved. That is by the by. Premiums were not loaded to cover reimbursement of the NHS to the extent that is now envisaged. Indeed, the Government expect that the Bill will generate income for the health service over and above that which is generated at the moment. That is predicated on an increase in payments to the NHS.

If we are to have a sensible debate about paying for the NHS, it is vital that people are aware of how they are paying for it. People know that they pay income tax. The polls show that people would gladly pay more to improve the services provided by the NHS. We are unable to have that debate with more than one party as other parties have decided that they will not use that approach to raising income. It is important that the general public know, and are allowed to find out, how much they are paying through the back door, because the amount that they pay through general taxation has been politically limited by political parties, and newspaper proprietors who beseech political parties not to pursue certain policies.

2.15 pm

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm for the record whether he seeks to start a debate on a genuinely new approach to NHS funding? Or is the Liberal Democrats' only proposal to increase income tax to fund the NHS yet further out of general taxation?

Dr. Harris: Not at all. The hon. Gentleman will know that his party—somewhat later than mine—has called for a debate on NHS funding. We have made it clear that we are not minded to believe that the private sector is an effective source of income to help take the strain of NHS provision. We do not believe that it is possible to save the NHS by urging people not to use it, but we accept that that argument and others could be put in such a debate. If the Government intend to increase direct charges for prescriptions and other items, or to increase indirect charges through some form of insurance, they could be explicit and honest in such a debate. We would welcome that debate. We have our own ideas to put forward, but we are certain that, until we have an explicit, honest and rational debate, it is premature to increase surreptitiously the amount that individual users of the NHS pay through regressive, indirect means such as charges on motor insurers.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I wish to make a point supplementary to the point made by the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Runnymede and

Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). The debate goes much wider than the question whether income tax should rise. We should put on the agenda what charges should remain—including prescription charges. The debate is also about funding residential care and nursing care for the elderly, which could be a subject for a royal commission, and where the social security system fits in. I hope that my hon. Friend will make it clear to his colleagues in today's debate that we are willing to participate with all other parties in what we would call a commission on the future of the health service. We should have the debate outside Parliament, in the open, with patients, the professionals and the pharmaceutical industry.

Dr. Harris: That is the critical point. If people do not know by how much car insurance premiums have risen, they will not know the effect that the Government's legislation is having on their pockets. Far too little attention is given to indirect charges in other public services. That is why we seek to make that information available by means of new clause 3, which has been tabled by Conservative Members and which we support, and of new clause 2.

I do not accept the ABI's rather mild representations that the information will be commercially sensitive. It has said that premiums will increase, and I do not believe that it will be impossible for insurance companies to work out how much they are paying to the NHS and by how much premiums have had to rise to take on the onus of funding the health service as well as insuring people. Car insurance is a highly competitive market, and of course some information will be commercially sensitive, but the information called for in new clause 2 cannot be refused by the Minister on the basis of the ABI's objections.

The Government claim that they support open government and wish to be honest with the people. We hear such rhetoric. Indirect charging is a litmus test of whether the Government will be explicit about costs. I urge the Minister to accept new clause 2 in the name of openness. It will certainly improve the Bill.

Mr. Hammond: I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). I was a little surprised to hear him say that he supported new clause 3, tabled by my hon. Friends and me, because it was tabled as an alternative to new clause 2, tabled by the Liberal Democrats.

Parliament will want to monitor the Bill carefully, as it introduces a major new charge in the NHS. Hon. Members will want to look at the legislation's effect on both NHS revenues and insurance premiums paid by the motoring public for two reasons: first, because it is important to see the impact of the measure; and, secondly, because the measure is innovatory, so people will be anxious to establish its overall effect. One issue that it will be important to consider is whether its impact is equitable.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon spoke about the increases in insurance premiums that will undoubtedly flow from the introduction of the measure, but it is not clear whether insurance premiums will increase uniformly across the board. Different insurance companies have different client profiles and claims experiences, and the measure's impact on insurance premiums is likely to differ radically between different groups of motorists.

An issue that deeply concerns us is the anti-rural bias, which this side swipe at the motorist by the Labour Government undoubtedly has. We shall bear that in mind when we monitor closely how the measure impacts not just on motorists in the aggregate, but on sub-groups of motorists.

It is undeniable that careful parliamentary scrutiny of what flows from the legislation will be needed. When considering new clauses 2 and 3 as alternatives to each other, the question is what is practicable and workable, and how much commercially sensitive information it is reasonable to expect private sector companies to provide. In Committee, the Minister referred to the opportunities that will arise for parliamentary scrutiny when the Government change the charges levied under the Bill, as they propose to do periodically. To ensure that the scrutiny debates that take place on those occasions are properly informed, information about the measure's overall impact must be available.

Mr. Hutton: It may help the hon. Gentleman if I make it clear now, as I did in Committee, that we want hon. Members to have access to the fullest possible range of information to allow them to review the operation of the scheme. I made that clear in Committee; if it will help the hon. Gentleman now, I am happy to repeat it on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the Minister for repeating that. If he can answer in the affirmative the specific question that I am about to ask, it will go a long way towards reassuring Opposition Members. New clause 3 proposes that the Secretary of State submit a report to each House of Parliament annually, giving details of the total amount raised through charges under this legislation. That differs somewhat from new clause 2, proposed in the name of the Liberal Democrats, which places a duty on insurers—those who will pay the charges—to report to Parliament, giving detailed information on the impact that those charges have had on the calculation of their premiums and on their specific businesses.

The Association of British Insurers agrees with us that companies that operate in a commercially sensitive area should not be asked for too much information about how they run their businesses and calculate their premiums, and about the profile of their customers. Those experienced in these matters, of whom I am not one, could deduce valuable commercial information from the type of information that new clause 2 proposes should be supplied to Parliament.

I am relatively new in this place, but I find it curious that an outside body such as a commercial company should have to report directly to Parliament. It seems more appropriate that the Secretary of State should gather whatever information is needed and report to Parliament; he could then be answerable for his report in this place.

New clause 3 achieves, without the disadvantages of new clause 2, much of what the Liberal Democrats seek to achieve. Information about premiums may be difficult for a commercial company to define in a meaningful way for the lay reader, and I would question the value of some of the information that the Liberal Democrats seek to have provided to the House. Indeed, in a briefing note that it has issued to all hon. Members, the ABI says:

"Insurers are already required to produce company accounts and should not be bound to reveal additional commercial information to Parliament. Information on total receipts should be available from the NHS itself".

[Mr. Hammond]

That is the essential point. The information that would have to be presented to Parliament under new clause 3 could be derived by the Secretary of State entirely from the compensation recovery unit, from his own records and from Government agencies, without imposing additional burdens on companies operating in the commercial sector. It could be derived without imposing additional burdens on the machinery of government and its agencies because, in a properly run organisation, which I am sure the compensation recovery unit is, that information will be readily available.

Thus new clause 3 seeks to use aggregate information that is readily available. Because it is presented in an aggregate form, it avoids the pitfalls that the ABI has identified in terms of the revelation of confidential information, while still providing the House with the critical overall figures that will tell us how successful the measure has been in terms of funding the NHS. That information would be directly available under new clause 3. It would also inform an intelligent analysis of the impact, in aggregate, on motor insurance premiums.

I suspect that trying to use central data to determine the impact on individual groups of motorists or individual motorists would be a fruitless exercise. On the sound basis of some aggregate data which the Secretary of State could provide, hon. Members, in pursuing the scrutiny process, may rely on anecdotal information collected from constituents on the differing impact on premium rates across the spectrum.

2.30 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Is there not another difficulty with new clause 2 in addition to those that my hon. Friend has brilliantly analysed? New clause 2 requires insurers to provide information according to the preceding calendar year, yet many insurers operate on entirely different financial years, so the new clause is even more onerous than it seems.

Mr. Hammond: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. He is absolutely right. The problem is compounded by the fact that settlements of claims are often not made for two, three or four years. It may be difficult to gain an informed view from information that relates to the preceding year.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon referred to what the Opposition health team calls the "information not collected centrally" syndrome. In Committee, the Minister, with some humility, recognised that syndrome. We have seen it on innumerable occasions when seeking information from the Department through parliamentary questions. The Department hides behind the decentralised structure of the health service as it was: it is becoming an increasingly recentralised structure, as the Government implement various measures. The decentralised structure of the health service enables the Secretary of State to say that information is not collected centrally. It is perfectly clear that a well-run health service requires information to be collected centrally. We have no doubt that it is available to NHS regional executives, and could be collected by the Secretary of State if he chose to do so.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Now that it has been accepted across government that the collection of statistics should be more independent and that there should be an independent statistical department, there is no excuse for the Government not to do what is necessary. In the health service in England, statistics could be collected regionally—no one would object if it were done region by region, because we could add up the figures for each region ourselves—or centrally by the Department in Richmond house. The information can be gathered without the Government saying, "No, we don't like it."

Mr. Hammond: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The NHS is a vast organisation spending billions of pounds and employing hundreds of thousands of people. The collation of information is essential for the proper management of an organisation of that scale. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that. Indeed, the Secretary of State has shown his willingness to make more information available. He famously told the BBC "Today" programme back in September that he would ensure that, as soon as possible, data on total waiting lists—those awaiting a first consultation with a specialist and those awaiting in-patient surgical treatment—would be available.

The Secretary of State seems not to be keen on an independent audit or examination of the figures. On the same broadcast, he referred to a reputable firm of chartered accountants that specialises in collating data on the NHS as a "tinpot firm". That appropriately sums up the Secretary of State's attitude to the independent scrutiny of these matters.

We want an assurance that the Government will not hide essential information about the impact of the Bill behind a smokescreen by saying that the money is distributed to individual hospital trusts and that the information is available only at that level. In Standing Committee, reference was made to the fact that information was available in the published accounts of hospital trusts. It is not practical for parliamentarians who want properly to scrutinise these matters to plough through the annual accounts of thousands of hospital trusts up and down the country and aggregate the information. In a well-run Department of Health, the information should be available in an aggregate form.

Can the Minister satisfy the Conservative Opposition that the data referred to in new clause 3 will be regularly made available to Parliament? We would be satisfied if he could assure us that information on the amount of money collected by the compensation recovery unit and distributed to NHS trusts will be included in the quarterly data series. Alternatively, if the Secretary of State is unable to do that, the presentation to Parliament of that information in an annual report, as the new clause suggests, would achieve the same end, although somewhat more tardily.

The intentions of the new clause would be better served by an assurance from the Government that the data required will be included in the quarterly data series. If the new clause were carried and the data were provided annually, the information could be out of date when any proposed changes to the amounts to be charged were scrutinised.

We seek an assurance that the aggregate figure, which is readily available to the Secretary of State, will be regularly made available to Parliament. I can see no basis

on which the Government could object to that. It would enable Parliament to perform its work of properly scrutinising the outcome of the legislation. That is important in itself, but also because these are the first new charges of any substance that the Government have introduced in the NHS. We and the Government will want to assess carefully the effectiveness of these measures and their impact on the overall funding of the NHS. I hope that the Minister can give us some reassurance about his willingness to make the data available.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I support my hon. Friend on new clause 3. It is less prescriptive than new clause 2. Having listened to what the Minister said, I do not think that the Government and the official Opposition are too far apart. We are looking for reassurance that statistical information will be available by which we can measure the effectiveness of the operation of the legislation.

The Association of British Insurers supports the concept of parliamentary scrutiny, as we all do. It is important that the collection system be seen to be fair and efficient. Earlier, the Government took credit for raising between £120 million and £140 million through this proposal, and said that it would not cost anyone anything. However, as we have heard, insurance costs will be incurred. How the data can be collected efficiently will be an important matter for hon. Members to consider.

The impact on insurance premiums may be different for different categories. The young may pay disproportionately higher premiums, so may be hit much harder. If the Minister could move a little more in our direction, we could be reassured that there will be enough information to have a sensible, reasonable debate about the effectiveness of the legislation, how it is operating and what impact it has on the national health service, insurance payers and our constituents; and, having sat on the Committee considering the Bill, I for one would be satisfied.

Mr. Hutton: The arguments in support of both these new clauses rest on a number of assumptions that I do not accept. The first assumption is that the Government have been less than open about the impact of the legislation, especially on motorists and on NHS funding. That is not so. The new clauses would lay down new obligations to disclose information, but that is unnecessary for reasons that I shall outline.

The Opposition assume that the Government are trying to withhold information, but we are not. Throughout the passage of the Bill, we have tried to help Members to appreciate the fundamental issues underpinning the legislation. We want to make the maximum amount of information available to allow proper scrutiny by the House of the proposed measures. For a general reason, I feel that there is no substance in the underlying arguments in favour of either new clause. Both would impose additional obligations on the Government to disclose information to the House.

The arguments for the new clauses are based on a second false assumption—that we are imposing a new charge on people who use the national health service. We are not doing that. The Bill will simply streamline and improve arrangements for collection of existing charges, which are recoverable under legislation dating back to the 1930s. It is concerned with ensuring that the NHS can recover the costs of treating road accident victims, not from motorists or patients but from insurance companies, when a successful claim for compensation has been made following a road traffic accident.

Mr. Hammond: I do not accept the Minister's assertion that this is not a new NHS charge. The Government are giving teeth to a mechanism that has enabled the collection of a piffling £15 million or £16 million a year in charges, to ensure that £150 million a year is collected. The man in the street, however, sees little difference between the introduction of a wholly new charge and the ratcheting up tenfold of an existing charge, converting a relatively meaningless exercise into the raising of a significant amount.

Mr. Hutton: With respect, I think that most members of the public can distinguish between the more effective collection of an existing charge and the laying down of a new charge for the use of the national health service. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman's argument is very coherent, and I am not sure that he will consider it to be so after he has had a chance to reflect on it.

There is no logic, or foundation in fact, for hon. Members' justification of the new clauses. It is underscored by the assumption that the Government are trying to withhold information from the House and from individual Members, which has led to the demand in new clause 2 for an unprecedented obligation on insurance companies to give the House information directly in the form of annual reports, and the demand in new clause 3 for the Secretary of State to make that information available annually.

The hysteria among Liberal Democrats seems to have subsided. I assume that they now have the hustings for the leadership vacancy that has arisen under better control. Perhaps, in the current spirit of harmony between the two sides of the House, we can begin to examine the real issues created by the Bill, rather than the fantasy and hyperbole that featured in much of what the Liberal Democrats said in Committee.

We are discussing a simple mechanism that will facilitate the recovery of NHS charges. We want the NHS to benefit from significant additional resources. We have some sympathy with what the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said, but we want to be sensitive to issues of commercial confidentiality. We are aware of the burdens on business, and we do not intend to impose unnecessary and unreasonable burdens on insurance companies, which is one of the reasons why we do not support new clause 2.

I should make it clear that the Department has never refused to offer MPs information about amounts collected by the NHS under existing road traffic legislation—

Dr. Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No, I will not.

As I said, the Department has never refused to offer information, and we have no intention of withholding it in the future.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge helpfully stated that, according to information received, just over £16 million was recovered last year under the existing scheme. The Department of Health already

[Mr. Hutton]

collects such information: we aggregate trust accounts relating to road traffic income. The information is readily available now, and will continue to be available to hon. Members in future.

Mr. Hammond: I suspect that the information to which the Minister refers will be extracted from trust accounts, and that there will therefore be a delay. The new regime for which the Bill provides will give the Minister an opportunity to obtain the information directly from the compensation recovery unit, a Government agency. Assuming that the unit is computerised, I would expect the information to be available on a quarterly basis, and very soon after the event.

2.45 pm

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman has done the House a favour by drawing attention to one of the benefits of the changes that we are introducing. The compensation recovery unit will have the advantage of up-to-date information technology, including new software, that will enable the information to be available to the House more quickly. I am not sure that we shall be able to provide it on a quarterly basis, but as a result of access to more efficient information technology, we shall generally be able to provide it sooner.

I assure the hon. Gentleman, and others who are worried, that we have no intention of withholding such information from the House. It is important information; it will inform debates on any regulations laid before the House; and we want scrutiny of the legislation to be as well informed as possible.

One of the difficulties that we have encountered with the Bill so far is caused by the desire on the part of Liberal Democrats in particular to misrepresent what we are doing. I understand that—it is a purely opportunistic political exercise—but we do not intend to withhold crucial information from the House. We want the House to be well informed, and we will ensure that it is.

For the reasons that I have given, I do not believe that there is any substantive argument for either new clause.

Dr. Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No.

We do not accept the arguments of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) for his new clause, which we consider to be unreasonable and unfair. We do not intend to legislate along those lines.

I hope that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge and his colleagues will accept my assurance that we intend to make it absolutely clear that the information will be made readily available. We are committed to reviewing the scheme after six months, and to publishing the results of our review. I hope that, on that basis, the hon. Gentleman will not press new clause 3, and the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon will not press new clause 2.

Dr. Harris: It is interesting that the Minister should ask me not to press new clause 2, but—with uncharacteristic churlishness—should refuse twice to allow me to intervene to ask him a specific question that might have enabled me to decide whether to press it.

We do not doubt that information, particularly that requested in new clause 3, can be made available, and that the Government will do their best to make it available. That is why the Liberal Democrats did not table a similar new clause. We are reassured. Although we support—as we did in Committee—measures to enable the Government to provide the information, I believe that it will be available by means of parliamentary questions, the six-monthly review and other channels. As I said in Committee, I feel that it would be more readily available if payments were made to health authorities—which I think should be done for other reasons—but I think that it can be obtained from trusts and, probably, from the compensation recovery unit.

We tabled new clause 2 because we feel that the crucial information that is required relates not to the global sum raised, but to the effects on individuals' car insurance. That will, of course, be a matter for debate. I was trying to help the House to decide whether this is a valuable way of raising money for the NHS by urging the Government to consider incorporating measures that will force insurance companies to make their own calculations on the effects, to help Members and the general public to educate themselves as to how much NHS revenue will result from the higher premiums.

I understand the Conservatives' views on commercial information. I am sure that it is possible to word legislation more tightly to enable information to be obtained from insurance companies and examined without the sharing of commercially confidential information. Liberal Democrats want to extract a flat figure representing the amount that insurance companies think ordinary people are contributing to the increased amount that is being collected.

I accept the Minister's opening point that the charge is not new. If hon. Members check the record, they will find that Liberal Democrats have at no point stated that we believe the charge to be new. We think that there was an opportunity to get rid of a charge, but it is clear at any rate that the Government will have increased income. That is one of their reasons for introducing the legislation.

The measure will generate additional income from an existing charge by making its recovery more compulsory, by nationalising it, in effect, and by making it more efficient. If one wants to raise revenue by that method, the Bill is a good way in which to do it. Because we do not want to do that, we oppose the measure; it is not because the Bill is badly drafted, or would achieve its aim inefficiently. However, we do want to see exactly how the extra amount is raised from individual drivers' car insurance.

Global sums of millions of pounds are difficult for people to understand in their everyday life. Indeed, the Government rely on fazing people with large figures when, uniquely and cleverly—although rather sneakily—they present extra money for the health service in three-yearly cumulative totals, not the usual year-on-year totals. I hope that any figures that come from the Government do not, if they apply to more than one year, repeat the habit of rolling up matching funding from one year with the previous year's allocation and the new allocation. That is a bad habit, which makes it difficult for people to understand.

People understand the amount of money that they pay in the pounds, shillings and pence on their car insurance. I ask the Minister to give me some assurances that there will some way to estimate, even from the Government's figures—although I am not convinced that I would necessarily accept them 100 per cent.—what the charges will be.

Mr. Hammond: I am delighted to hear a Liberal Democrat using the currency of pounds, shillings and pence. I am not sure where that leaves the hon. Gentleman in the Liberal Democrat leadership stakes.

The hon. Gentleman said that he wanted to know what the extra cost of the measure to ordinary people would be. Does he not understand that the problem is that there is no single ordinary person—there is no average motor insurance payer? The impact will range from zero on some insured people to substantial on others. The figure that has been quoted of £9 or £10 as an average—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I sometimes give leeway to those on the Front Bench, but I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to get away with a speech during an intervention.

Dr. Harris: I think that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) would have been helped by leaving out his preface, which I am sure hon. Members will be bored with in a few weeks. It is not my intention to digress on to those matters. You will note, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Liberal Democrats have been careful not to rise to provocation from other hon. Members.

I understand the point that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge makes—that there is no single figure, but there will be ranges. We would like an undertaking from the Government that they will do their best to put their research capabilities to the task of giving a range, from zero to what the extra cost will be for each individual car insurance payer because of the charges. What is certain is that £160 million means nothing to people in terms of what they pay on their car insurance. The range of costs that the hon. Gentleman talks about—from zero to £20—would mean something.

I think that hon. Members on both sides of the House accept that it would be more sensible to have those figures collected in an orderly way, rather than hearing scare stories from the insurance industry, the AA or political parties of any persuasion about what those costs will be.

I return to my original proposition: it is important not only that the Government should be open about the amount of income that is raised by the measure—I accept the Minister's assurances on that—but that it be clear to individual taxpayers, drivers, voters and patients how much the Government's decision not to use this opportunity to abolish these indirect charges is costing them. I still look to the Minister for advice on that point. However, even if he is unable to give me any help, it is not our intention to divide the House on the matter.

Mr. Hammond: I am happy to take what the Minister said at face value and to accept his good intentions. However, we will look to ensure that the data is made available as quickly as the technology used by the compensation recovery unit allows.

Mr. Hutton *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hammond: The Minister nods. If we can accept that there is a genuine intention by the Government to make that data available regularly as fast as possible, we will be satisfied. I thank the Minister for that assurance.

Mr. Hutton: I can give the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge the assurance that he seeks.

Dr. Harris: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 3

Information contained in certificates

Dr. Harris: I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 3, line 43, leave out '2nd July 1997' and insert '1st April 1998'.

I am sure that the House is aware that the amendment is the last to be considered at this stage of the Bill. It seeks to right an injustice. It would leave out 2 July 1997 and insert 1 April 1998 as the date for which the charges will apply for in-patient treatment—and it should be out-patient treatment as well.

The Government have defended 2 July 1997 as the date from which the charges will apply on the basis that that was when the Chancellor of the Exchequer first said that the Government were going indirectly to raise additional money for the NHS from people, through their car insurance. Presumably, they thought that insurance companies could make provision to weight their insurance premiums accordingly from 2 July 1997, so that the extra income that was raised through the Bill could be collected from their customers through increased insurance premiums; that is the logical approach that one might imagine the Government were taking.

If that is the case, surely the Government must accept that there will be some lag time before the insurance industry is able to adjust to the more efficient way in which the Government are collecting the charge, and the increased amount of charge that the Government are collecting.

I think that hon. Members on both sides of the House will recognise that it would have been impossible for someone to change his car insurance premium on 2 July 1997 after he heard that car insurance premiums might be affected from 2 July 1997. The insurance industry has said reasonably that costing the effects of the measure outlined briefly by the Chancellor on 2 July 1997 might take about three months. Logically, assuming that insurance renewals come due evenly throughout the year, another six months would elapse before, on average, insurance companies were able to reclaim, or to build into their costing, the effect of the more efficient collection of charges—and, indeed, a higher overall collection of charges. That is why, by simple arithmetic, 1 April 1998 has been chosen by the Liberal Democrats as the date on which the new tariff should apply.

[Dr. Harris]

In Committee, we looked at 1 April 1999, so that everyone would be able to see car insurance premiums increase as the insurance industry adjusted to the new situation; but following debate in Committee, we felt that, on Report, a compromise of 1 April 1998 would be fair. It would not be seen retrospectively to penalise those insurance companies that were either no longer in a position to seek to redress the losses that they will make because of the new legislation and the Government's failure to build in a time lag, or that felt that they were unable to make provision in the marketplace to make up for the loss of income from premiums to pay the charges to which they would be due.

Can the Minister defend the date of 2 July 1997 on any basis other than the one that he gave in Committee? Will he not recognise that even a fast-acting insurance industry that accepts the Bill must have some time to adjust, so that it does not penalise those members of the industry that are not selling insurance, and does not seek to reclaim old debts by stacking the insurance premiums for new customers over and above those who were lucky enough to reinsure just before 2 July 1997.

3 pm

Mr. Hammond: Conservative Members are always concerned about retrospection in legislation. From Second Reading and from reading the debates in Committee—I was not privileged to be a member of the Standing Committee that considered the Bill—the only argument that has been advanced for setting the start date at 2 July 1997 is that that is the day on which the Chancellor announced his intention to legislate.

I submit that, announcing an intention to do something, is not the same as doing it, especially when it relates to parliamentary legislation. Businesses should not be required to change their patterns of operation or, in some cases—in this instance it may be a relatively minor issue—make major changes to their businesses, on the basis of an announced intention by the Government of the day. That could have pernicious and unfortunate effects if it were carried into other areas.

We at least maintain the fiction that Government proposals are subject to scrutiny by both Houses of Parliament and to amendment during that process. The Government, and the Minister who is with us today, maintain the fiction that the Government listen attentively to the points raised in Committee and will consider any worthwhile amendments. It is perhaps not surprising that substantial amendments are not often accepted in Committee. The suggestion that, once the Chancellor or some other such estimable person has announced an intention to do something that requires legislation, everybody in the country should drop tools and act as if it were already the law of the land, displays a tremendous arrogance. It displays the Government's arrogant attitude towards the legislative process.

Even if the industry should have responded immediately to the announcement by so great a person as the Chancellor, by its very nature, the insurance industry could not have adjusted its prices immediately to take account of the additional effective burden being imposed upon it. I do not like to second guess the Minister, but no doubt he will say that the charges were always in place and, in theory, could always have been collected. However, it is an essential part of the Government's argument for the Bill that they were not collected. It is beyond doubt that a reasonable commercial organisation will base its behaviour on what is happening and what will happen in the world rather than on what might be theoretically capable of happening.

Humble Back-Bench Members—Ministers have the privilege of being driven around—will be familiar with the process of purchasing motor insurance for themselves. They will know that, customarily, it is done on an annual basis. Indeed, annual motor insurance is the best deal available because cover for shorter periods tends to be more expensive. On 2 July, any insurance company faced with the Chancellor's announcement, would have had a portfolio of current motor insurances, some of which might have had only one day to run and some of which might have had up to 364 days to run. It would be impossible for an insurance company to respond equitably to an increased burden of costs imposed upon it by the Government on the day that the announcement is made, even leaving aside the question of whether business should feel obliged to respond immediately to a mere announcement of an intention to legislate.

When I say that an insurer would be unable to respond equitably, I mean that the insurance company needs to ensure that the relevant insured persons bear the additional cost of the measure. Inevitably, the only action open to an insurer will be to increase the premiums on renewal from the date of the announcement. That means that those who, by definition, are not covered for some part of the first year after the announcement, will gradually be forced to pay the additional cost of meeting the unrecovered portion of the extra premiums that that company would have charged had it issued policies—there are no such policies in the United Kingdom—that would enable it to make immediate changes and collect supplementary premiums from it policyholders.

The Liberal Democrat amendment appears to be illogical. The date mentioned should be 2 July 1998, the date by which all annual motor policies—the vast majority of policies—in force on 2 July 1997 would have fallen due for renewal. It would have been more appropriate for the amendment to have proposed the date of 2 July 1998 or a date after the Bill is enacted.

I note from the briefing presented by the Association of British Insurers that it supports the Liberal Democrat amendment. I suspect that, behind that lies the belief that something is better than nothing and that it is seeking to limit the damage done to the business by the element of retrospection involved in a start date of 2 July 1997.

Going beyond the motor insurance business, an important point of principle for the insurance industry is at stake. The industry operates on the basis of actuarial calculations of risks faced during the insured period. It would be a serious matter for the insurance industry in its broadest sense if the Government took to introducing legislation which impacted on the costs of that industry and which took effect from the date of announcement, notwithstanding the fact that, by its very nature the insurance industry needs a lead time in which to levy additional charges in the form of increased premiums on its customers. That would leave insurers facing risks that they had not taken into account when setting their premiums for a period up to one year for motor insurance or even longer for other forms of insurance.

A further anomaly can be seen in the treatment of the Motor Insurers Bureau. Under the Bill as currently drafted, the Motor Insurers Bureau will have this charge imposed upon it on a date after the Bill has become an Act. I accept that it may not have been clear at the time of the Chancellor's announcement that the Motor Insurers Bureau was to be included in the scope of the measure. For the Government to be logical and consistent, however, they should now be saying that the start date for the bureau should be the date on which it first became publicly recorded that the bureau would be subject to the charges under this Act.

Either commercial insurance companies should benefit, as the Motor Insurers Bureau will, from a start date after the Bill's passage, or the Motor Insurers Bureau should be treated the same as insurance companies. If the latter option were chosen, the start date should be not 2 July 1997—I accept that the Chancellor did not announce on that date that the provisions would be extended to the bureau—but 8 December 1998, which, as far as I can determine, is the date on which Ministers first announced in the House that the provisions would extend to the Motor Insurers Bureau. Is the Minister able to deduce any logic in applying a seemingly entirely arbitrary start date to the Motor Insurers Bureau?

I do not expect for one moment that the Government will accept amendment No. 2, but the issue of start dates and retrospection is worthy of reconsideration. I ask the Minister to assure the House that he will examine the issues that have been raised, not only as a means of tidying up the legislation but of addressing an important issue of principle that may have greater implications for the insurance industry in the future. It would be unfortunate if the Bill set a precedent of retrospection which may have much more serious consequences in the future. I hope that Ministers may yet decide that, in the other place, they want to tidy up that part of the Bill.

Mr. Hutton: The Government have already very carefully considered all those issues of principle. We believe that the arrangements that we have established in the Bill, and the way in which we plan to implement them, are the fairest and most sensible way of proceeding. The entire purpose of the exercise is to ensure that the national health service properly recovers the costs of treating road accident victims, and that has always been the principle behind the legislation. We are simply ensuring that that principle—which has been accepted in the House for 70 years—operates in practice. The beneficiaries of the arrangements will be the NHS and those who use it, our constituents.

A significant extra sum will be collected for the NHS because of our proposed arrangements. The fundamental reason why we cannot accept amendment No. 2 is that it would strike at the very heart and purpose of the Bill, by denying the NHS significant new resources for a further considerable time. We are not prepared to allow that to happen.

Sir Robert Smith *rose—*

Mr. Hutton: I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) made it sound as though our announcement on 2 July was made in an insignificant place. It was not. The announcement was made in the House, during the Chancellor's Budget statement. In such circumstances, it was therefore perfectly reasonable to say to the insurance industry, "You have been given sufficient notice of our intention to proceed on those lines." That is our view.

Sir Robert Smith *rose—*

Mr. Hutton: I shall not give way.

The Government are therefore unable to give the assurance sought by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge—that we might review the operation of that aspect of the Bill. We do not intend to do so.

Mr. Hammond: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: With very great respect, we need to make some progress. The issues have already been discussed in Standing Committee, and hon. Members are anxious to conclude the proceedings.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge also mentioned the Motor Insurers Bureau. The point is that, for the first time, the MIB is being introduced into the arrangements, which is a significant change. We have therefore decided to propose the arrangements outlined in the Bill. As it is a new departure, we believe that our proposed arrangements are the appropriate and most sensible way of proceeding.

Our argument is clear and consistent. Our arrangements are sensible and will guarantee maximum income for the NHS, which is what we want to ensure. We cannot accept the Liberal Democrats' amendment.

3.15 pm

Dr. Harris: The Minister's answer was entirely unsatisfactory, as it did not deal with the points that I made or the points that were made so clearly and precisely by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). It is not adequate for the Government simply to say, "We're not going to be fair to the insurance industry. We'll be quasi-retrospective about it, because we want to maximise income." The issue is not one of income maximisation. If it were, why do we not simply set unfair higher fees, which would be another way of maximising income?

I listened very carefully to every word that the Minister said. At no point did he address the substantive issue of dates; indeed, no date other than 2 July passed his lips. Our amendment to change the date on which the changes will apply will not strike at the Bill's "heart and purpose" but merely create the appropriate date on which the changes should apply. It is difficult for me to be persuaded by the Government's argument if they do not deal with the substantive points that have been made.

I should like to know whether the official Opposition feel that the Minister's reply dealt with the arguments that they made. Merely reciting the Bill's purpose is not a sufficient way of debating significant concerns about retrospectivity. It is a matter of fairness. The Government of course want to maximise income, but if that is the only principle they are pursuing, they will be riding roughshod over the principle of natural justice.

[Dr. Harris]

As the Minister has not addressed the substantive issues raised by me and the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, the Liberal Democrats shall press the amendment to a vote. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge has just finished making a very clear speech, which the Minister entirely failed to answer. It is therefore incumbent on Conservative Members to put their votes where they mouths are, and not continue to abstain in Divisions on substantive legislation simply because they want to spend more time on Thursday afternoons shoring up their constituencies. We did not change the hours of the House so that they could abstain in Divisions, as they did in the previous one.

It is still mid-afternoon, and Liberal Democrat Members are keen to engage the Government in debate. When I press the amendment to a Division—as I shall if the Minister has nothing further to say—I hope that Conservative Members will support us with their votes and not only with their words.

Mr. Hammond *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I should tell the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) that the tradition in the House is that the hon. Member who moved the amendment should be the last to speak to it, so that he or she may be able to withdraw it.

Mr. Hammond: I should like merely to respond to the point that the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) made—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can do so on another occasion.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 24, Noes 225.

Division No. 44] **[3.18 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cotter, Brian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Livsey, Richard
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tyler, Paul

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tom Brake and
Mr. Phil Willis.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Da[illegible] Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*

Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Rooker, Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Order for Third Reading read.

3.30 pm

Mr. Hutton: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Today and in Committee we have had the opportunity to look carefully at the Bill and its purpose. We are trying to streamline, improve and manage more effectively the existing scheme for recovering the cost to the national health service of treating road traffic accident victims. We are determined to do that for a number of reasons that we have repeatedly spelt out during proceedings on the Bill.

The NHS needs the extra resources that the scheme will provide, and the Bill is badly needed. It will free hospital staff from the burden of questioning patients when the care and treatment of those patients should be uppermost in everyone's mind. Patients will no longer be confused or worried about a scheme that does not affect them directly.

It is worth emphasising that since the 1930s the insurance industry has had the primary obligation to meet the costs of treating road traffic accident victims. We want there to be no misunderstanding about the Bill.

The scheme will raise a good deal of money for the NHS, not, as some hon. Members wanted, going to another tier of NHS administration—an outcome that the Liberal Democrats tried to secure in Committee—but going directly to hospitals, where it can be used to the immediate benefit of patients. In the overall scale of NHS finance, the amounts may not be great, but they are substantial injections to the budgets of the hospitals that stand to receive them and the sooner the Bill is enacted, the sooner the benefits will be received.

A number of specific concerns have been raised and it would be helpful if I took the opportunity to set the record straight. We reject the accusation that we are imposing a new tax or a new charge. It is vital to remember that NHS charges can be recovered only when it has been recognised that the patient has a claim against another person in respect of his or her injuries. In such cases, insurers have always known that the victim is entitled to use and claim for private sector treatment if he or she so wishes. The insurer has no choice but to pay. However, insurers have largely escaped paying equivalent NHS charges simply because of the lack of a system for their recovery. The Bill will fundamentally address that by putting into place a new, effective, streamlined costs recovery system.

There has also been concern about the new scale of charges. What is new about the Bill is the move towards recovering amounts more closely in line with the actual costs to the NHS. Many of the points made during scrutiny of the Bill have concerned the move to those new, higher costs and some unease has been expressed about their calculation and their future uprating. Much of that concern has been needless and has involved party political point scoring, primarily by the Liberal Democrats.

The figures have been arrived at openly and honestly using information which is in the public domain and freely available. Our costs have been derived from work undertaken by the Transport Research Laboratory and published in its research paper 272, with co-operation from the police, the NHS and the Department of Social Security compensation recovery unit. The calculations and source data were all contained in the regulatory appraisal—we have nothing to hide.

We have rightly rejected calls for reports to be filed at set intervals on the tariff, the amounts collected and so on. The Bill is no different from any other—including all the previous road traffic measures which have governed NHS charge recovery. Its subordinate legislation, which I understand is the source of some concern to hon. Members, will come before the House in the normal fashion and hon. Members will have every opportunity to question and discuss planned changes. In response to a direct question from the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) today, I made it quite clear that it is the Government's intention to assist hon. Members in discussing the impact of the Bill and the new arrangements that we are introducing and to make sure that all hon. Members have access to the most up-to-date, relevant and timely information to allow them to reach their own decisions about the operation of the new arrangements.

Some concern has been expressed about the effect of the changes on the motorist. Much of it has been based on ill-informed speculation. Large insurers have gone on record as saying that the measure probably will not affect their premiums, yet the scaremongers persist. Let me make it quite clear today that we have calculated and openly published our estimate of what the scheme would mean if the total NHS charges were averaged out and spread evenly among all drivers. If that were the way in which the insurance industry raised the charges, we estimate that the effect would be an increase of 2 to 3 per cent., or £6 to £9 on the average premium.

Mr. Hammond: I understand what the Minister is saying, but does he accept that the costs will not be averaged out and will affect some motorists more seriously than he suggests?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman has tended to anticipate my remarks and he has done so again.

[Mr. Hutton]

We expressed the figures in those terms to make it quite clear that under our insurance system, drivers who cause accidents carry a greater risk and pay higher premiums. If there were an effect on premiums, it would be likely that careless drivers would contribute most.

The allegation by some Opposition Members that the Bill would affect rural motorists as a specific group of drivers is completely unfounded. The premiums will reflect risk. Drivers at high risk will pay more. Safe drivers should face no increase.

Sir Robert Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No.

For those reasons and many others, this is a sensible and sound Bill. It will assist the NHS in recovering the costs of treating road traffic accident victims. It will provide additional resources to the national health service. It is what our constituents want. The money will benefit the hospitals in our constituencies. I endorse the Bill and urge the House to support it on Third Reading.

3.37 pm

Mr. Hammond: I should make it clear at the outset, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have done during the Bill's progress, that we do not object in principle to the Government's purpose in introducing the legislation. Indeed, I welcome the shift in the Labour party's thinking that it represents.

The Minister is sheltering—as Ministers have done before—behind the claim that the measure represents no new charge. That is disingenuous. The Minister has made it quite clear that the Bill will increase tenfold the yield from road traffic accident victims. It is currently £15 million or £16 million. Technically I am sure that the Minister is right to say that it is not a new charge, but the impact on the tax and charge-paying public will be that of a new charge. One cannot increase something tenfold and then say that nothing has changed.

To say that, because the charge was there in theory but was not used in practice, starting to use it is a mere technicality and not a change in policy is similar to saying that because we have had nuclear weapons for 50 years, suddenly starting to use them would not be a major decision or a major change.

The Government have also sought to gain some comfort from the fig leaf of indirect charging. I understand the political attractiveness of that, but the fact that insurance companies will pay the NHS charges and then recover the cost through premiums to motorists is not intellectually distinct from directly charging users of the NHS. Worse, perhaps, is the fact that taking the fig leaf and using it to protect themselves has led the Government to set their face against the logic of the Bill, and the way in which, quite possibly, that logic must be extended.

The Bill represents an important turning point. The Labour party has crossed the Rubicon with this measure. After years of arguing against charges, the Labour Government have used precious legislative time not to abolish a charge that was yielding very little, but to beef it up so that it produces substantial sums. The Government could have abolished the charge in the same amount of legislative time that it has taken to make it effective and productive of large amounts of revenue. It appears that Labour has overcome its objection to the principle of charges.

I do not seek to beat the Government over the head, as this is a small but important victory in the battle to end the dominance of dogma in their approach to the health service, but to begin the rational debate, for which my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and I have called—as have the Liberal Democrats today—about how to fund the voracious appetite of a modern health service for resources.

The Government and the official Opposition are both publicly committed to year-on-year, real-terms increases in spending on the NHS from general taxation. That is not an issue. Except for a few diehards—who are usually to be found, although not today, below the Gangway on the Government Benches—and the Liberal Democrats, almost no one now believes that we still live in a era where taxes can be jacked up endlessly to meet the demands of the NHS.

Notwithstanding the commitment to year-on-year, real-terms increases—and whether it is 0.5 per cent. more over the life of this Parliament, as the Government are now delivering, or 0.5 per cent. less is very interesting, but makes no real or meaningful impact on the resource constraints facing the NHS—the fact remains that a health service that is funded exclusively from general taxation in an environment of broadly low tax, both domestically and internationally, will remain heavily resource-constrained.

My right hon. and hon. Friends and I argue that without compromising or eroding in any way that commitment to year-on-year rises in spending from general taxation on our health care system, the system in its totality needs more resources than general taxation is likely to be able to provide. To address that issue, we must think laterally. If the Bill signals the Government's willingness to consider any source of funding for the NHS, it is a small but important start to the process.

The basis for considering any method of providing additional funds for health services must be the test of whether it is fair, equitable and sensible. It might surprise the Minister to learn that, for the most part, we believe that the Bill passes that test. It is sensible to introduce it and to put on the statute book the measures that the Minister proposes.

The principal area where, in our opinion, it does not pass the test—and the principal concern that we have expressed throughout the Bill's passage—is the discriminatory targeting of the motorist. We have seen the interesting spectacle of two Labour demons colliding in the Bill; the taboo on NHS charges has run smack into the desire to clobber the motorist at every opportunity. The charge on the motorist to be introduced by the Government is regressive, and has an anti-rural basis. It comes on top of the £9 billion of extra taxes that the Chancellor is imposing on the motorist over the lifetime of this Parliament.

In effect, the motorist is being double-taxed. He is being asked to pay more than his fair share into the Consolidated Fund of general taxation through the dramatic increases in motoring taxes proposed by the Government. He is then being asked to pay again, on a discriminatory basis, for his use of the NHS.

The Government have done something else—they have accepted the principle of insurance as a basis of spreading the burden of costs of health care. Indeed, they are sheltering behind the existence of compulsory motor insurance as an argument for the motorist being a unique category. Everybody would agree that the Government would never have considered introducing a £10,000 cap on the charge to be levied on an individual without any means test if the individual himself had had to pay the charge, rather than its being paid by his insurance company and the very considerable costs involved being spread across all motorists through the mechanism of insurance premiums.

There are other areas where those treated on the NHS—often at very great expense—are insured. It is not logical for the Government to ignore that and say that the motorist is in a unique category and everybody else is different. Some poor, rural motorists may find it odd that they are being targeted to pay the additional charges when people returning to the United Kingdom from expensive skiing holidays with broken arms or in need of complex knee surgery—with insurance companies that have paid for their treatment in Switzerland, France or Italy—have their often very expensive treatment here on the NHS, without any requirement at all for them, or more precisely their insurers, to contribute as motorists are being asked to contribute.

Ministers have often said that the principle of equity in the NHS is important, and Labour Back Benchers support that. One is bound to ask, "If motorists, then why not also other insured, compensated victims who need NHS treatment?" I did not know much about the operation of the compensation recovery unit until I started to look at the provisions of the Bill. I have learnt that one of the unit's main functions is to recover benefit that has been paid out in cases where, for example, employers have paid compensation after industrial accidents. If benefit is clawed back by the compensation recovery unit on behalf of the Treasury—where it has been paid out to the victim of an accident who, subsequently, has been reimbursed or compensated by the insurer of the employer—why should the NHS charges that that person has incurred, or has imposed upon the system, not similarly be recovered from insurers?

I cannot understand the logic of the Government's position. They are saying that someone who carries compulsory motor insurance must be expected to pay for the cost to the NHS caused by treating third-party victims, while someone who carries compulsory employers' liability insurance need not reimburse the cost of NHS treatment carried out following an industrial accident or another insured risk—while the insurer must reimburse the cost of the benefits paid out. Where is the logic? There is none—it is as simple as that.

It is unfortunate that the Government have closed their mind to the logic, as that has led to a clearly inequitable outcome, with motorists being the victims. Effectively charging is being introduced for one group of the population only, and that charging is being introduced without any form of means testing. Undoubtedly, if the Government were to propose any wider form of charging, they would be looking at the ability of those charged to pay. In this case, everyone's insurance premiums will go up. As Liberal Democrat Members noted, the effect will be highly regressive, and I believe that it will be especially burdensome in rural areas.

The Government have repeatedly assured the House that the proceeds of the charges will constitute extra money and be a little bonus for the NHS hospitals involved. I do not believe that. The original statement of the intention to make the charges effectively collectible was made by the Chancellor in his 1997 Budget. It is not credible to suggest that the revenue to be raised in that way had not been factored into the Government's calculations in deciding what total Treasury spending on the NHS should be. Surely the Chancellor must have considered that revenue as part of the wider equation in setting the Department of Health budget in aggregate.

I am concerned about the impact on individual health authorities. The measure will channel about £150 million from insurers to individual hospital trusts, but it is extremely unlikely that that money will be spread evenly, principally because the incidence of road accidents varies. Certain hospitals specialise in high-level trauma such as is often suffered in accidents, and hospitals near the motorway network routinely treat many accident victims. It is likely that the revenue will be heavily skewed towards such hospitals.

In allocating money to individual health authorities, will the Government ensure that the revenue that a hospital trust receives as a result of the Bill will not be taken into account and used as a reason for reducing the overall allocation to the hospital's health authority from general taxation? I am tempted to suspect that, over time, the Department of Health will take into account the revenue streams flowing to hospitals that specialise in trauma when setting the allocation to the host health authority. At a disaggregated level the money from the charges could be used to reduce the receipts of the authorities involved.

The Labour party used to recite almost as a mantra the slogan, "An NHS free at the point of need and funded out of general taxation". We have reaffirmed our commitment to a service that is free at the point of need and to increasing year on year the real-terms expenditure on that service from general taxation. Beyond that, we believe that there is a need to bring in additional resources by other means and that we should consider every option, provided that it is fair, equitable and sensible. There is an urgent need for an open debate on the subject.

If the Bill represents a genuine transformation in Labour party attitudes—a rejection of stale dogma and a willingness to engage in constructive debate about how to feed the voracious appetite of our health services over and above the funding that can be found from general taxation—we welcome that as an important step forward.

3.55 pm

Sir Robert Smith: I did not intend to speak, but the Minister refused to take an intervention on a point that interested me. It is a pity that Ministers are not more willing to take interventions; if they were, that could speed up our proceedings. He seemed to be saying that the fact that a motorist pays a higher premium proves that he is a more dangerous driver than others. It would be more correct to say that the motorist comes from a category that insurance companies consider to be a higher risk. Young motorists can be perfectly safe drivers, but they are penalised with a higher premium because they come from a group that is seen to have a higher risk of causing accidents.

[Sir Robert Smith]

The Bill will cause some drivers to pay considerably higher premiums because, as others have said, one cannot get something for nothing. If the Government are right, and the money can be delivered to the health service at no extra cost, why are they not aiming for a higher sum? If there is no cost to be met, they should be raising far more.

On Second Reading, our health team made it clear that the Bill should be opposed on principle. Having heard the arguments in Committee, I feel even more strongly that it should also be opposed on Third Reading. I am disappointed by the Government's attitude to the concept of retrospective legislation and their inability to accept any compromise or meeting of ways. They insist that, because something has been announced by a Minister, it must, de facto, be assumed that it will become the law of the land. That is absurd if we are to continue to have a legislative process and a House of Commons.

Other Departments have accepted amendments or compromises and agreed to introduce changes on Report or in another place, in response to concerns expressed in Committee or by groups outside. To say that, because insurance companies will have read in the newspapers that the Chancellor has declared that he wants to do something, it must be calculated, ipso facto, that that will definitely happen is a disgraceful way to treat the House and the country. The Chancellor has made other claims on which he has not delivered. He cannot have it both ways.

It must be accepted that, until legislation has passed all its stages, the process of lobbying and the right to make changes continue to exist. In this Parliament, with such a large majority, the Government seem to have decided to close their ears to representation and they are telling the wider public that they do not want to hear their views because they do not plan to act on them.

Someone planning an energy Bill in the previous Parliament would have been slightly put out by an increase in VAT on energy consumption, because the then Government were defeated in trying to pass such a measure. I hope that, in another place, perhaps with different Ministers and the more considered debate that is possible there, the Government will amend the Bill and make it less damaging.

3.58 pm

Mr. Syms: I have followed the Bill's progress on Second Reading and in Committee. The debate has been interesting and we have not always reached the expected conclusions. The Minister said that the legislation would be judged on whether it streamlined the process and created an improved, more efficient scheme. Certain aspects of the Bill will certainly improve the scheme. The abolition of the emergency treatment charge has been widely welcomed by Government and Opposition Members.

Our earlier debate on whether the charge should remain for general practitioners or private hospitals was somewhat bedevilled by lack of information on both sides. We were not quite sure what was collected, who collected it or whether it was worth collecting. The Government said that they did not want to get rid of it because the GPs would be unhappy and some Opposition Members said that perhaps it was not worth having, but we did not have enough information to take the debate much further.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said, there is a point of principle at stake, because the Government have gone for a group of insured people in order to raise money. Throughout debate on the Bill, we have asked whether the Government have started on a slippery slope that will lead to more charges for, perhaps, home owners or for people involved in skiing or other sporting accidents. The official Opposition have expressed concerns that the Bill will breach a principle, and consequently affect many people's live .

We support funding the national health service through general taxation and we believe that it should be free to those who use it. However, all Governments have to consider ways to supplement the health service's income and it has been an education to watch how quickly this Government have moved to try to raise money from private motorists. The Minister said that careless drivers would pay the charge, but, as the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) pointed out, the young pay higher insurance premiums than other drivers, as do certain categories of people with medical difficulties. The insurance companies determine those charges, but if—as most Conservative Members believe—the Bill leads to higher insurance premiums, some of those least able to afford the charges may be affected.

In Committee, I raised the pot of gold argument. The Government have taken the credit for some £120 million to £160 million additional resources for the NHS, but they seemed to suggest that it would come from nowhere and not cost anyone because the charge was in place and the insurance companies were collecting it. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said, the money will have to come from somewhere, and we all know that it will come from charges by insurance companies on motorists. Motorists will pay an extra £120 million to £160 million, which will fund the NHS. That may not be a bad outcome, but the Government should be more open and acknowledge that motorists face an additional charge.

We also raised the issue of retrospective legislation. On 2 July 1997, the Chancellor announced a charge, without giving any details. Even if an insurance company had rapidly decided that it wanted to recoup the charge, it would not necessarily have been able to do so. I hope that the Government will reconsider that issue.

We have been accused of scaremongering, but we have pointed out that the money will have to come from somewhere. It will be raised by charging more to certain categories of motorists and some people will pay much more than they currently do. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge pointed out that we have to judge whether the Bill is a fair, equitable and sensible measure. Indeed, we are in favour of the Bill in principle, but the devil is in the detail. It is important that we have full scrutiny of the Bill's effect, and we must review the collection agency and its efficiency and effectiveness in collecting the charges. We must also review how the money is distributed to hospitals and health authorities.

I was pleased by the assurances that the Minister gave during the Bill's progress that the Government did not want to hide statistics. When a new computerised system is set up, it is possible to arrange affairs so that information can be provided to Members of Parliament,

and I am sure that the Minister will endeavour to achieve that. We have had an interesting debate and I look forward to hearing contributions from other hon. Members.

4.4 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: We are coming to the end of proceedings on this short Bill and I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith), who looked after our interests so diligently in Committee. On Second Reading, when we supported the Conservatives' reasoned amendment, we said that this measure was not the right way to raise money for the health service.

When the Labour party came to office, it discovered a potential source of extra money for the NHS and, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said, it decided to make it produce more money—10 times more, an increase from £16 million to £160 million. However, we still do not know whether the Bill is an admission that the Government will look openly at the funding of the health service or a one-off response to an opportunity to raise more money by increasing an existing charge. The Government said nothing about such a move in their manifesto or during the general election, but it will mean that some people will make an additional contribution to the health service.

On Second Reading, we said that we did not like the Bill but that we would see what happened to it in Committee. I was not a member of the Committee, but I understand that proceedings there followed the same pattern as today's. For example, we made the sensible proposition, in new clause 1, that we should abolish the system under which general practitioners, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), may collect money directly from someone involved in a road accident. General practitioners do not like to do that and most of them do not do so. We suggested that GPs should be paid for that service in the same way that they are paid for emergency treatment. That is a sensible proposition, but we have seen no movement in our direction by the Minister.

We also argued, with support from the Conservatives, that the legislation should not be retrospective. I am a lawyer by training and I have always sought to defend people against retrospective legislation. Whether its effect is big or small, the principle is wrong. We suggested that the date should be changed, but the Government have not conceded the point. The only concession made was on the need for clearer statistics, although the Minister was not very helpful when he was asked by my hon. Friends how many non-NHS and NHS doctors had said that they were in favour of the system. The Minister said that he had received representations, but he would not tell us how many.

The core issue is the financing of the health service. We will vote against Third Reading of the Bill because we cannot have uncertainty about how money for the NHS will be raised. It will be the Government's fault if, in the future, different categories of people are required to make contributions to the health service because they have been injured when undertaking certain activities. There is no difference in principle between people who drive and are involved in an accident paying into the health service through their insurance companies and people who go on sporting holidays and are injured—like my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Opik), when he went paragliding—doing so. If we extend the principle behind the Bill, there is no reason why my hon. Friend should not pay for his treatment. By the same token, people who are injured in their local park, at their place of work or climbing up a ladder at home should have to pay. There is no logic in charging only those involved in road accidents because they could have been charged in the past. People do not believe the Government's claims on that point.

I am in favour of more funds for the health service, but I would also like to see a public debate about how to raise them and the Government have not so far responded to that. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine said, we feel less reassured after proceedings on the Bill than we did before. We have supported from the beginning the Government's uncontroversial proposals to abolish the emergency treatment, but the Bill contains much more.

We shall once again try, therefore, to defeat the Bill, this time on Third Reading. It is, I expect, unlikely that we shall succeed, but if we do not try, we cannot succeed. Our consolation is that, whatever the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) may think, we have a two-chamber Parliament. The other House has no Labour majority, and it contains many independent people of expertise and knowledge who may amend the Bill. We hope that the Bill will be amended in the way that we have proposed. The Government have not done so, and, no matter how unsupportable their arguments have been, they have remained resolute in opening the door to charges in the health service that have never been part of rational debate. We ask the House to reject the Bill, and to reconsider health service charging in another place, at another time and in a more comprehensive way.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time:—

The House divided: Ayes 228, Noes 24.

Division No. 45] **[4.10 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Coventry NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John

Cunningham, Jim *(Coventry S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Groocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Marron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pleskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Rooker, Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cotter, Brian
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Livsey, Richard
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Tyler, Paul
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Colin Breed and Mr. Adrian Sanders.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

Scottish Enterprise Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill has a narrow and, indeed, a technical compass. It arises because section 25(2) of the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act 1990 places an aggregate financial limit on Scottish Enterprise. For it to continue its operations, that limit must be raised every few years. The purpose of this Bill is to increase the financial limit from the present £3 billion to £4 billion. In addition, it removes the provision that enables the Secretary of State to increase the limit further by statutory instrument, so clearing the way for the Scottish Parliament to introduce its own arrangements in due course.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): I cannot resist commenting on the fact that, barring accidents, this should be the last Scottish Bill ever to pass through this Parliament. As my hon. Friend may recall—well, perhaps not personally—the first Scottish Bill to pass through it was the Court Exchequer (Scotland) Act 1707, which concerned taxation. Is it not entirely appropriate that the final Scottish Bill to pass through under this Government concerns enterprise?

Mr. Macdonald: My hon. Friend makes a fair and historic observation. I understand that this will be the last Scottish programme Bill to be presented to the House, so it is a matter of some note. As I said, the Scottish Parliament will arrange such matters in future.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Does the Minister accept that there might still be ballot Bills containing Scottish legislation?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am not sure whether I put the Question on the mini-debate that is taking place. Perhaps we may now move on to the main debate on Scottish Enterprise.

Mr. Macdonald: As I said, this will be the last Scottish programme Bill to be presented to the House.

To return to less controversial matters. A number of items count towards the financial limit that is placed on Scottish Enterprise: first, its and its subsidiaries' general borrowings; secondly, sums issued by the Secretary of State or the Treasury in fulfilment of guarantees; thirdly, loans guaranteed by Scottish Enterprise or its subsidiaries; and finally, the largest item comprises payment from the Secretary of State consisting of grant in aid less administrative expenses, plus voted loans payments.

The increase to £4 billion will allow Scottish Enterprise to continue to operate until approximately March 2001. Thereafter, as already noted, the Scottish Parliament will have an opportunity to consider the future funding arrangements. It is entirely right that that should be a matter for the Scottish Parliament to decide.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): On a practical, not a historical question, I hope that the legislation will encourage the officials of Scottish Enterprise to ensure that the money is invested in areas of high unemployment and in desperately needed developments. The Gourock waterfront development is one such example and it is crying out for assistance. I hope that, by way of this Bill, the Minister will encourage Scottish Enterprise to give that development some support.

Mr. Macdonald: The legislation will not do so by itself, of course, but it will enable Scottish Enterprise to keep functioning and, therefore, to follow through the Government's plans and the strategy that has been agreed with SE, which takes into account the very points made by my hon. Friend.

Expenditure for 1997-98 alone has achieved some significant successes: the creation of 30,000 jobs opportunities; 17,700 projects undertaken with Scottish businesses; 5,300 new businesses started up, generating £33 million of additional sales and employment opportunities for 13,500 people; and finally, 87 inward investment projects.

Recently, there has been much in the news about job losses, which are always of concern. Yesterday, we heard of the possible closure of the Wrangler factory in Falkirk with a loss of 500 jobs. I understand that Forth Valley Enterprise, the local authority, the Employment Service and Triaze, which is a new deal training company, are meeting to put together practical steps to help employees gain alternative employment. Falkirk is not the only area to have to cope with setbacks of that nature.

Those statistics do not tell of the real impact on individuals and families who suffer because of job losses. However, the successes in creating jobs should also be noted. Of particular relevance to Falkirk, Thomas Cook in Larbert has just launched a campaign to recruit at least another 250 staff in the next four to five months. There are other successes throughout Scotland. In recent months, such companies as Foxteq, Packard Bell NEC, Bank of Bermuda, BSkyB and Universal Scientific Industries have announced plans to create more than 6,000 new jobs in Scotland. Yes, jobs are being lost, but throughout Scotland there are positive successes in job creation.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently provided Scottish Enterprise with strategic guidance that will ensure that it is aligned to the Government's aims and objectives for the economy as a whole. That includes the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), and we debated those aims on Monday in the Scottish Grand Committee. The strategic guidance lays out ambitious plans for Scottish Enterprise: to help create 100,000 new businesses in the next ten years; to improve their survival rates; to broaden the knowledge base of the Scottish economy; to promote the clustering of companies in sectors that are most likely to benefit from a strategy of collaboration; to engage the strength of large companies in partnerships across the economy; to raise the level of investment in research and development; to sustain Scotland's attraction to inward investment; and finally, to help Scottish Trade International to create new exporters and expand new markets for Scottish goods.

That is an ambitious programme, but we consider that it is achievable within the current level of funding. It is a programme that goes beyond June 1999, when the

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current aggregate amount outstanding will be reached. The purpose of the Bill is simply to raise that level to enable Scottish Enterprise to continue its work to meet those objectives until the Scottish Parliament can consider afresh the funding arrangements for Scottish Enterprise. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.30 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): As the Minister and some of his hon. Friends have mentioned, this is the last Scottish programme Bill before the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] That will be a matter of delight to Labour Members, but a matter of sadness to me not to have the opportunity in my guise as MacLetwin to encounter the Minister with his charm and elegant exposition. It has frequently been the case in Committee and on considering orders that the Minister has been able to make his remarks concise. I hope that I have been able to oblige by also reducing mine, in some cases to approximately 30 seconds. That would be in the tradition of the Scottish Enterprise Bill's predecessors: when previously the limit has been raised, the debate has been short. I fear, however, I cannot utterly oblige the Minister on this occasion. I hope that he will bear with me if I make a few observations about what I think is a remarkably different situation from that which first appears.

This is a short Bill—that is an understatement—and it appears to be innocuous. After all, when allowance is made for the Scottish Enterprise (Aggregate Amount Outstanding) Order 1997 having raised already the limit to £3,000 million, this Bill only raises the limit by a further £1,000 million. I hope that hon. Members will pause at the words "only raises the limit by a further £1,000 million". That is about enough to pay 50,000 nurses for a year, to buy 1,000 miles of railway, to pay 37,600 teachers, to build 340 primary and 150 secondary schools or to build 10 major district hospitals. It is a large sum. It is about the same as the gross domestic product of Fiji or Nicaragua and about twice the GDP of Chad or Belize. I hope that those measures make it plain that we are not talking about peanuts. The question is whether we are dealing with monkeys.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Does the hon. Gentleman recall any such substantial increase during the Tory years when cities such as Glasgow were left to get on with high levels of unemployment to the despair of many citizens? The previous Government simply ignored their needs.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The last time the limit was raised under the order it was raised by £1,000 million, so I can recall, or rather read about, such things. As I proceed the hon. Lady will discover that we in the Opposition have no opposition to the idea of an increase, nor to an increase of this magnitude. We may find ourselves joined by the hon. Lady in a few moments when she realises what is happening in Scottish Enterprise.

It is true, as the Minister says, that this organisation claims to have created about 30,000 jobs, net, at a cost of about £15,000 a job, if my arithmetic serves me correctly. That is not all that it does. The level of information that the organisation provides in its report and accounts is a good deal better than sometimes applies to non-departmental public bodies. It is still fairly exiguous compared with the amount of information about most public companies—certainly most public companies spending £400 million a year or so as this does.

There is enough in the report and accounts, with which the Minister is no doubt fully familiar, to cause more than a few eyebrows to be raised on the Benches opposite. This is not a partisan point, but something on which the whole House can agree. *[Interruption.]* I wonder whether the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), who from a sedentary position says that there is no reason for eyebrows to be raised, knows how much Scottish Enterprise spends on administration.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I am sorry to intervene. I was pointing out that there are no hon. Members behind the hon. Gentleman to raise their eyebrows.

Mr. Letwin: I do apologise to the hon. Gentleman, but I did say the Benches opposite. As a matter of fact three of my hon. Friends are here and ready to offer themselves and their wisdom to the House. In any event I hope that we can make up in quality for what we lack in quantity.

I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman knows or, indeed, whether the Minister has at the forefront of his mind just how much this organisation last year spent on management expenditure. Let us bear in mind that its total expenditure nets about £400 million. The national health service—not always cited as the prime example of management efficiency in western Europe or the world, and certainly not usually cited by the present Government as such because they accuse the previous Government of having inflated its management—spends about 0.7 per cent. of its budget on management. That is a little less than 1 per cent. and would be equivalent to Scottish Enterprise spending £4 million on its management. The Department for International Development or the Welsh Office spend a rather higher amount—about 2 per cent., which would suggest about £8 million in this case. Perhaps most relevantly, the Scottish Office spends about 5 per cent. of its budget on management, which would suggest about £20 million in this case.

It may, therefore, come as a surprise to some Labour Members—it certainly came as a profound shock to me when I got to grips with these accounts—to find that this organisation spends nearly £70 million of its £400 million budget on management. That is a genuinely astonishing achievement. I do not know quite how it is managed, but that seems to be the case.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): When the hon. Gentleman says that he got to grips with the accounts, did he talk to the Scottish Office and give it an opportunity to give an explanation?

Mr. Letwin: I took advantage of the House of Commons Library and asked for a note on the matter. So far as I can make out the expenditure is partly the consequence of the rather elaborate federal structure—perhaps of interest to the hon. Gentleman—that the organisation operates with its subsidiaries, the local enterprise companies. It is also no doubt the case—I judge this from the statements made on the internet provision,

the website and other statements by Scottish Enterprise management itself—because it prides itself on offering a high level of service to what it calls its clients, or those whom it is trying to help. The fact remains that the total sum of expenditure on management and administration is extraordinarily high.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) *rose—*

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Mr. Letwin: Of course I will give way.

Mr. Morgan: Would the hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Dalyell: Simply once more—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must indicate to whom he is giving way.

Mr. Letwin: I do apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I did not know that two hon. Members were seeking to intervene. I give way to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell).

Mr. Dalyell: As one who in his constituency work, like my colleagues, has a good deal to do with the organisation, I have the anecdotal and first-hand impression that it is efficient. I do not want to score points against anybody, but fair is fair. Before making this kind of criticism the hon. Gentleman should talk to those involved.

Mr. Letwin: Nevertheless there is a set of accounts and the hon. Gentleman's anecdotal impressions must be reconciled with the facts that the accounts present. The facts presented suggest that £70 million of public money is spent on management and administration. That is not all that emerges from the accounts. The body also publishes a balance sheet. We might ask ourselves just how much cash an organisation like this needs to keep in the bank at any given time. Perhaps a few million pounds would be perfectly reasonable. Is it not therefore a matter of some surprise to discover that almost £90 million are kept in cash at the bank or in hand? Does that not strike one as a rather large sum of money?

Mr. Morgan: Regardless of the validity or otherwise of the hon. Gentleman's criticisms, would he care to tell the House who put in place the structure to which he is referring?

Mr. Letwin: The structure was put in place by the previous Government. That is fully acknowledged. It is a matter of some concern to me that the previous Opposition did not point out some of these things. That is no reason for the current Opposition to fail similarly. It is the duty of this House to scrutinise without regard to political partisanship; that is precisely the job that I am trying to fulfil.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It has been suggested that there are bound to be rational explanations for the phenomena to which my hon. Friend drew attention. We have a Minister present who will no doubt be able to explain the matter in his reply.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is right that that should be the position. No doubt my remarks will cause the Minister to make some illuminating utterances, if he chooses to make any later. My hon. Friend would be misled if he supposed that it is only the items to which I have referred that cause concern.

In the strategy guidance to which the Minister referred, there is no mention of how the organisation is administered. Much is said about what it should be doing vis-a-vis the external world but nothing, as far as I could determine, about how it acts internally. That leads me to suspect that the Minister may not quite be able to live up to the high expectations of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) of his ability to enlighten the House on the matter.

Things are worse than might be supposed because on examining the accounts, we next discover—the Government appear to have noticed this, to judge from the statements of the Secretary of State—that Scottish Enterprise has turned itself over the years into a sizeable property company. It holds an asset base—it is not clear on what valuation—of about £200 million, on which it seems to make a normal commercial return of about 5 per cent. One might say that there was nothing wrong with that, but it would be interesting to discover why it needs to hold such a portfolio. None of the statements in the report and accounts or otherwise published by the organisation make the matter clear. I must share my view with the Secretary of State because he has asked it to redirect its efforts away from property towards other activities.

The organisation has a heavy burden of management—at least in respect of the costs associated with it—a large amount of cash in hand, and a big property portfolio. I could bore the House with an analysis of the other issues that cause concern.

Mr. Swayne: Do.

Mr. Letwin: I do not intend to do that, not least because I know that Labour Members are desperately keen to get on trains and disappear under the new dispensation for Thursdays.

It is a remarkable fact that, irrespective of the veracity of the anecdotal observation of the hon. Member for Linlithgow that the organisation is highly efficient, the matter has not, so far as I was able to determine, been investigated. Over many years, the Public Accounts Committee has not investigated whether it operates thoroughly efficiently. That brings me to the main burden of my argument.

The Minister is right that hereafter, it will not be this Parliament in which such questions can be raised. The Public Accounts Committee will no longer in any obvious sense be able to examine them; they will move to the Scottish Parliament. The Minister will remember that as a concern of Opposition Members right from the beginning of the prolonged debates on devolution. It was raised vividly in one debate by the Chairman of the PAC. I know that we are talking about efficiency rather than

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outright fraud or impropriety, but how will such matters be monitored in the new arrangements for the Scottish Parliament?

Sir Robert Smith: To draw conclusions from what the hon. Gentleman has said so far, the Scottish Parliament will provide an opportunity more closely to monitor such matters because it will have the time and inclination. As he said, the current set-up has not done the job and he has found nothing in print to assist him in understanding the accounts.

Mr. Letwin: That is an interesting point but I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will hold that view when I have finished. Certainly, the Accounts Commission for Scotland has concerns. It has probably invited him, as it has me, to a reception.

Mr. Home Robertson: How much will that cost?

Mr. Letwin: Indeed, we must ask that.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): Why not pay your own way?

Mr. Letwin: I have no intention of paying my way into the reception.

We are told that the reception will examine a key theme: the role of public scrutiny and audit under the Scottish Parliament. At least the commission is asking the right question. There is a serious problem but I wonder whether Ministers have seriously considered it. That brings me face to face with the point made by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith). The Scottish Parliament will not be spending its own money, apart from what the Prime Minister tells us to regard as the penny rate. Of course, no Government or Parliament has its own money; it is all taxpayers' money, but the Scottish Parliament will not even be spending money that it has raised but money from the United Kingdom that will have been voted by this Parliament. We know a good deal about how human nature reacts in such situations because we can examine the long record of local government.

We all know that local councils—whether controlled by the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, or even, dare I say it, Labour—have a long and enviable record of successfully arguing, whenever they find that their inefficiencies prevent them from fulfilling the needs and desires of their local communities, that the cause is lack of cash from central Government. I have not the slightest doubt that all parties in the Scottish Parliament will, if left to their own devices, first resort to the argument that any lack comes not from the inefficiency of the bodies that they administer but from an insufficiency of funds voted by this Parliament to the Scottish Parliament.

I do not say that as an accusation. Any hon. Member, including me, would be inclined in that position to make that argument. That is how democratic politics works but it raises a question that the House must address, and which I fear that Ministers may not have addressed. To what extent will it be proper for this House to consider the efficiency with which the funds that it votes to the Scottish Parliament, and which the Scottish Parliament administers on behalf, so to speak, of the United Kingdom, are disbursed? The case of Scottish Enterprise and the figures that I have raised concern about are a case in point. I believe that it will be proper for the House to continue to exert itself to try to find whether the moneys allocated are being efficiently spent in such cases.

Mr. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh, North and Leith): When we analyse the hon. Gentleman's speech afterwards, we will regard it as one of the better speeches by an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman in favour of a Scottish Parliament. He seems to be saying that the House has signally failed over all the years of Scottish Enterprise to exercise any scrutiny. Clearly, those of us who aspire to go to the Scottish Parliament will spend much more time examining the affairs of Scottish Enterprise than we ever have here. He is wrong to assume that we shall want more money on every question. The priority will be to ensure that we get maximum value from the large resources that we will have.

Mr. Letwin: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman, with his distinguished record in public service, for saying that my speech is good. I doubt that it is, but I assure him that it is not a speech in favour of, or indeed against, devolution. I am reflecting on the consequences of a fait accompli. I do not doubt that conscientious Members such as he, if they become Members of the Scottish Parliament, will seek to ensure that the things for which they are responsible are efficiently run. The question is: with what level of energy will they devote themselves to that task and to the much more politically attractive task of arguing that Westminster has not given them enough money? If the hon. Gentleman claims that the former task will be given a larger amount of energy and the latter will be given a lesser amount of energy, I would be happy outside the Chamber to take a large bet on the matter. This Parliament will continue to vote large sums via the Scottish Parliament to bodies which there is a serious threat that the House of Commons will no longer scrutinise.

We come to the second point that the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Chisholm) made. Has the House of Commons already shown itself incapable of examining such matters? The answer, I regret to say, is that as a result of the lamentable record of the previous Opposition, in the case of Scottish Enterprise the House was not good at examining such matters. But at least it had the motive for so doing. It could not blame anyone else if the money was badly spent and it could not ask anyone else for more money other than the taxpayers, who are also its voters.

Despite the badinage, there is a serious issue for the House. How far will we retain the ability to raise matters of concern that may be allayed by further investigation? If we do not retain that ability, we will betray the trust that our electors have placed in us by sending us to this place.

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): The hon. Gentleman seems to argue that the Scots cannot be trusted to look seriously at the way in which money is spent in Scotland and that only this Parliament can be trusted to do that. Will he reflect on the fact that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is the first Scot

to hold the position in more than 20 years, and that he, after Labour came to office, found an extra £40 billion that had been inefficiently spent by the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not want to pin the responsibility wholly on the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion), but I suspect that the argument is spinning to the further reaches of what is permissible. I wish to hear more arguments specifically about Scottish Enterprise.

Mr. Letwin: I will certainly stick by that admonition, although it is gravely tempting to respond to the hon. Gentleman.

In the case of Scottish Enterprise and many other such cases, the House will have to develop mechanisms for examination. Notwithstanding the fact that this is the last programmed Bill on Scottish matters and the last Bill that we shall see on Scottish Enterprise, as and when further increases are made in the amounts of money that Scottish Enterprise can spend out of taxpayers' funds, and as similar Bills come forward in the Scottish Parliament in relation to bodies governed by it, those amounts must be scrutinised. Such mechanisms may not often be invoked, but it must be possible to invoke them so that any serious concerns can be dealt with. The Minister has not said anything about that, which is odd. I think that he genuinely has not spent any time worrying about whether there are any concerns about the accounts of Scottish Enterprise. That is sad, but it is remediable.

The purpose of this Second Reading debate and my speech has been to ensure that the Minister goes away with his very able officials and works at precisely the question that I have raised. I hope that by the time we have gone through the Committee stage and come back to the Floor of the House for Third Reading, the Minister will be able to make an eloquent exposition on exactly how this Parliament will deal with the problem. If he does not, he will convict himself and his Department of failing to wrestle with one of the serious issues that arises from devolution, with which we have come face to face today as a result of the need to examine Scottish Enterprise.

In summary, there is a specific concern about Scottish Enterprise. That concern does not lead the Opposition to object to the raising of the limit, but it makes us wish that the Scottish Office would look closely at the matter. It is a concern that perhaps ought to be reflected in an investigation by some Committee of the House. More macroscopically, it is a concern that brings us face to face with the need for the House to develop adequate mechanisms to ensure that when public money is voted by this Parliament to the Scottish Parliament and ends up in the hands of bodies administered by the Scottish Parliament, it is nevertheless subject to the proper scrutiny of the House.

Mr. Macdonald: I shall try to respond to the points that the hon. Gentleman has made, but may I clarify whether he is attacking the Bill or simply wants to question the devolution context? I take it that he agrees with the Bill.

Mr. Letwin: That is correct. This is a probing speech in a Second Reading debate. I know of no other sufficiently serious way of raising this issue. We have no objection to the Bill and will certainly not ask colleagues to vote against it in the Lobby today.

4.55 pm

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): The fact that the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) has not been long in this House may explain—I am being charitable—how he conveniently ignores that for 18 of the past 20 years his party was in power and operated the Scottish Office. His party set up Scottish Enterprise in 1991 when it replaced the Scottish Development Agency.

The hon. Gentleman criticises Scottish Enterprise's management. While I would be the last to say that everything in the Scottish Enterprise garden is rosy and there is no room for improvement, it is only fair to point out what we get from that management. The summary of the results of Scottish Enterprise for 1997–98 includes

"the creation of 30,000 net additional job opportunities, a net additional £600 million added to Scotland's output; 17,700 projects undertaken with Scotland's businesses, leading to over £850 million of additional sales, of which over a third are exports; 230 companies entering new export markets; 180,000 employees benefiting from training and development; 640 companies committed to or recognised by the national standard of Investors in People; 77,000 enquiries handled by local networks of Business Shops and Enterprise Trusts; 3,300 new businesses started up generating 33 million additional sales and employment opportunities for 13,500 people; 22,000 visitors to the Personal Enterprise Shows; 87 inward investment projects attracted including high-tech research and development, such as Cadence and Clintrials, creating and safeguarding 18,000 jobs and generating £1 billion private investment; over 68 per cent. of young people received skills training as employed status and over 16,000 VQs were awarded; 4 out of 10 adults in Training for Work went on to a positive outcome; 350,000 sq m of property and 540 hectares of land developed in support for industrial and commercial businesses; 55 per cent. of contaminated and derelict land cleared and taken up for development; for every £1 spent by the Network on the physical business infrastructure in Scotland, £4.85 was contributed by others."

That impressive record may explain why Scottish Enterprise and its network are the envy of many other parts of the United Kingdom and the world.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I do not wish to appear churlish, but the point that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) was making was that, although all that may be true, it is at an enormous cost. In spite of what the hon. Gentleman has said, in the Scottish Enterprise annual report the chief executive said:

"Scotland, however, still lags behind the rest of the UK in the number of businesses emerging."

Mr. Marshall: Some people are never satisfied. If people do not speculate, they cannot accumulate. The investment return as part of the Scottish economy far outweighs Opposition Members' carping criticisms.

The Bill must command the unanimous support of the House. I was pleased to note that the Opposition will not oppose it—they know the political consequences of such a step, although there is little hope for them in the forthcoming elections in Scotland. I warmly welcome the Bill. Any Bill that updates the overall limit that Scottish Enterprise can spend from £3 billion to £4 billion is very good news. I congratulate the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Scottish Office team.

Some may say that it is one thing to uprate the spending limit, but yet another to spend any of the additional moneys. I do not believe that the Government would have introduced the Bill if they did not intend Scottish Enterprise to use this additional spending power to deliver

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some of the Government's key economic objectives. This proposal will be a massive boost to the new Scottish Parliament, especially as it will take over the running of Scottish Enterprise. The money will be even more essential to the future well-being of Scotland in an ever-increasingly competitive world.

I shall touch briefly on two of Scottish Enterprise's activities: first, its international role, and secondly, its involvement in the city of Glasgow. The Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, which I have the privilege to Chair, is currently conducting an inquiry into inward-outward investment in Scotland and tourism in Scotland. Those matters are connected, and both are vital to Scotland's economy.

Last week, the Select Committee visited the United States of America as part of that inquiry. The visit was well worth while, because it enabled us to see how Locate in Scotland, Scotland Trade International, Scotland Virginia Partnership and the British Tourist Authority in the USA promote Scotland's interests in that country. Other members of the Committee who are present may want to give their opinion of the success of the visit.

Suffice it to say that the USA is the largest market in the world, and it is also the fiercest and most competitive. City competes against city, county against county and state against state. Their problems are not vastly different from ours, and neither are their solutions. We are competing with them: we are all competing with each other in north America and in the wider world. It is to the great credit of Scottish Enterprise and the component parts of its network that Scotland has done so well out of north America. We are the envy of many other places, few of which have done better than we have, although there is the odd exception.

The Committee also saw the operation of the consul general's office in New York and the British embassy in Washington, and met Scottish business people doing business in the USA. It also met with American companies, such as IBM, that are major investors in Scotland and in the United Kingdom as a whole.

Dr. Godman: IBM in Spango valley in Greenock employs almost 5,000 people, which makes it one of the biggest employers in the west of Scotland. I remind my hon. Friend that IBM has been in Greenock since 1951. It was brought there by the remarkable work of the late Sir Hector McNeil, who was the Labour MP for Greenock.

Mr. Marshall: As usual, my hon. Friend is correct in all that he says. IBM was the original inward investor in Scotland. IBM's importance to the Scottish economy is such that it is worth more than the Scotch whisky industry, and that says it all.

We met many American business people who are interested and involved in Scotland. Almost to a person, they were impressed by the activities of Scottish Enterprise, Locate in Scotland and Scotland Trade International. Americans do not give praise lightly, and members of the Committee were convinced that it was sincere and genuine, and a proper reflection of the activities of Scottish representatives in that country.

In the five days we were there we visited four cities: Stamford, New York, Washington and Philadelphia. I should like to place on record our appreciation for the assistance, information and advice that we were given by everyone we met.

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Gentleman is giving eloquent testimony to the work of the Scottish Affairs Committee. I am deeply grateful to him for that—I was unable to take part in the visit, so he is providing a great service. In the light of the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), does the hon. Gentleman think it proper to consider whether the Committee, of which he is Chairman, should undertake an investigation into the management of Scottish Enterprise?

Mr. Marshall: It is a matter of great regret to the Committee that the hon. Gentleman was unable to go with us, because we genuinely value the role that he plays on the Committee. No Conservative MPs represent Scottish constituencies, and we thought that the hon. Gentleman had committed some cardinal sin when he was put on our Committee. I say with all sincerity that he has played an important part in the work of the Committee and is a good member of it. I have no hesitation in saying that, and if it embarrasses him, so be it.

Let me answer the hon. Gentleman's question. I am sure that tomorrow I shall find on my desk a letter from him making the suggestion that he has just made to us. If I do, it will be given serious consideration in the normal way.

I feel that I should praise Steven Bennett, director of Locate in Scotland in north America, David Taylor, director of Scotland Trade International and Lisa Smith, executive director of the Virginia Scotland Partnership—or the Scotland Virginia Partnership, depending on which part of the world one is in at the time. We were tremendously impressed by the presentations that were made to us and by the work done by those people.

Whether we like it or not, globalisation is happening. We can no longer take the status quo for granted. I believe that Scottish Enterprise, Locate in Scotland and Scotland Trade International are doing all that they can in the United States on behalf of Scotland's interests. I also believe, however—and this brings me to the purpose of the Bill—that they could do much more with a few additional resources, especially in terms of staff and premises and especially in Canada, where there is a great affinity with Scotland, and where there must be considerable opportunities. Locate in Scotland has only four offices in the United States, and I am not sure whether Scotland Trade International has any. It is difficult to run such a vast area as north America out of four small offices with fewer than 20 staff. I think that the return on a reasonably modest increase in resources could make such an increase well worth while. There is great interest in the United States in the Cadence project in Livingston. It could give Scotland a leading role at the cutting edge of technology in the future and bring massive benefits to our economy.

I was impressed to learn that the commonwealth of Virginia was the first state in America—as far as I know, it is still the only state—to appoint a Secretary for Technology, because it considers technology so important. It is worth noting that there are 23,000

high-tech job vacancies in Virginia, which it is unable to fill because it cannot obtain trained staff. Perhaps the new Scottish Parliament will take on board the idea of a Secretary for Technology. Scotland has enough high technology to guarantee such a post, and I think that it would pay enormous dividends.

I counsel against going overboard on inward investment at any cost, and I hope that Scottish Enterprise will not dissipate too much of any additional moneys in that way. It appears that there are some unscrupulous companies that are interested only in obtaining whatever grants they can get, and then playing one area or country against another. They come in, take the money and run. We must not let ourselves be taken to the cleaners by such companies.

Mr. Letwin: I do not want to embarrass the hon. Gentleman unduly either, but I hope that he will accept that the Opposition thoroughly agree with what he has just said.

Mr. Marshall: I am unembarrassable, but that is by the way.

We would perhaps be better served by doing everything possible to retain existing jobs. That is another lesson that we learnt from our trip. Cities such as Philadelphia have great problems, and great similarities to Glasgow, which also has problems. They have found it more cost-effective and beneficial to concentrate on retaining jobs than to spend a fortune on trying to attract them. We should also encourage our indigenous industries to expand and prosper in their own areas. There is a feeling that we do not do enough in that regard.

It is essential that we expand our air services to Europe. At present they are totally inadequate. Perhaps Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Office will consider what can be done.

I am delighted that at last a Labour Government are getting down to tackling Glasgow's problems after 18 years of Tory victimisation of and bias against it. I am aware that £1.5 billion of public money is being spent in the city, but the scale of the problem is so great that it is still not enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) raised the issue in an Adjournment debate in the Scottish Grand Committee in Edinburgh on Monday. She referred to the problems of deprivation in the city, and I congratulate her on doing so.

Just a few months ago, the Scottish Office central research unit and the department of urban studies at Glasgow university revised the Scottish area deprivation index, which ranks areas by post code sectors. Thirty-nine of the worst 45 sectors in Scotland are in Glasgow, including the worst 15. Twelve of those 45 post code areas are in my constituency, including two of the top 10. Of the 618,430 people in Glasgow, 369,313, or 60 per cent., live in the worst 10 per cent. of post code sectors.

Those statistics are horrifying and unacceptable as we approach the new millennium. They illustrate why Scottish Enterprise must give more resources to the local employment company, namely, the Glasgow development agency, if the problems that face the city are ever to be overcome.

For example, the brown-field site budget is only £3 million, yet there are approximately 2,000 acres of derelict and contaminated land; 11 per cent. of the city's area is derelict or contaminated. That could be the source of much future prosperity if it is brought back into use as soon as possible. The draft Glasgow Alliance strategy has a target of bringing 50 per cent. of that land back into use within five years. Let us improve on that target, either in scale or in time. Again, Scottish Enterprise could spend more money in dealing with that problem.

Perhaps I should declare an interest, being a member of the board of the East End Partnership, of the East End Regeneration Management Board and a co-opted member of the board of Glasgow Alliance. The alliance has a visionary strategy and we now have a consultative document on a joint economic strategy for Glasgow. What we need now is action and, as I have said, even more resources from Scottish Enterprise.

Glasgow is turning itself around. There is much good in the city and a lot going for it. It is, indeed, miles better than it was. It has improved leaps and bounds, particularly over the past two years, thanks to the change in Government, but it must be remembered that, almost every year for the past 20 years, Glasgow has lost the equivalent of a Ravenscraig in terms of jobs. People tend to ignore that fact. Because it is a city, it somehow misses out.

Unemployment and poverty are still endemic in the city. There are still thousands of below tolerable standard houses, many in my constituency. Therefore, there are great opportunities for new housing partnerships. Scottish Enterprise is also involved in that.

The new employment zone has been good, but has had problems. I understand that it is £500,000 short of European social funding. If we cannot get ESF for that vital initiative, perhaps Scottish Enterprise can make up the shortfall. The hopes of hundreds of unemployed young people—including 80 of my constituents who are on the programme—depend on the success of the zone.

There are concerns in Glasgow and elsewhere that, with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, there will be a jobs drift from the west of Scotland to the east. Therefore, it is essential that the M74 extension from Tollcross to Kingston be completed as soon as possible. That is arguably the number one priority for the economy of Glasgow. It would free many hundreds of acres of derelict land for investment, create thousands of jobs, reduce pollution, improve the environment, eliminate congestion in the city, improve road safety and reduce pressure on Kingston bridge.

I appeal to the Minister to ensure that Scottish Enterprise spends its resources in a well-balanced way. It is fine to have physical developments and large projects, but it is also essential to concentrate on getting more to the poorest communities, especially if we are to maximise the advantages of the new deal.

Many thousands of young people have already benefited from the new deal, but many more have still to do so. We will not be able to levy former public utilities again to continue to fund the new deal, so, if we are to be serious about social inclusion, we must take the longer-term view and invest in training, education and infrastructure.

Thankfully, unemployment has fallen substantially since the change of Government, even in Glasgow. However, in the latest research paper issued by the House of Commons Library on unemployment by constituency as at December 1998, my constituency is ranked the

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16th worst in the UK and number one in Scotland. Indeed, eight of the top nine in Scotland are all in Glasgow and there are only nine and a bit constituencies in the city.

The male rate of unemployment in my constituency is 16.5 per cent. The female rate is 5.1 per cent., giving an average of 11.8 per cent. Those are tragic figures, and all the more so when we consider that they are substantially down on what they were two years ago and on what they were for most of the 18 years of Tory Government, when they were over 20 per cent. Under the Tories, there was no hope for my constituents, but, under the new Labour Government there is a great deal of hope. Let us extend the Scottish Enterprise budget by this £1 billion and ensure that it is spent to the benefit of the people of Scotland.

5.15 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall). As a member of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, I have enjoyed working with him and other colleagues, many of whom are present this afternoon. The hon. Gentleman was right to focus many of his comments about this Bill in the context of the Select Committee's visit to north America last week. We went to see, in practice, much of the work of Scottish Enterprise and its agencies, Locate in Scotland and Scottish Trade International. I concur with the hon. Gentleman's view that, as a group, we were very impressed by the work being done.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Shettleston because, in truth, he brought the debate back to the real issues that should be under discussion as we deal with the funding for Scottish Enterprise. I have, for my sins, over many years, pored over rather more sets of accounts than is probably safe for my sanity, but I have never inflicted an analytical review of a set of accounts on more than myself, and certainly not on a Chamber such as this. I was disappointed to hear that the main thrust of the speech from the Opposition spokesman was a comparison of balance sheets and expenditure over the past year. Although there is a legitimate scrutiny issue, time and again, the Conservatives have missed the point that, under the Scottish Parliament we will, for the first time, have an opportunity to have the accounts of enterprise agencies such as Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, looked at thoroughly whereas perhaps, in the past, this House has not done that particularly well.

The timing of the debate is opportune. It comes at a time when Scottish Enterprise is announcing a new strategy which will take it forward into the millennium. It comes in a week when the noble Lord Macdonald of Tradeston made a statement to the Scottish Grand Committee in Edinburgh. Also, as I have said, it follows the Select Committee's visit to north America where we were looking closely at the work of many of Scottish Enterprise's agencies.

The hon. Member for Shettleston has graphically painted a picture of how much work remains to be done in different parts of Scotland if we are to ensure that enterprise and economic development are shared out equally and benefit all areas of the country. Anybody who is in danger of being complacent has only to look at the list of recent job losses across the country. This week there have been job losses at Wrangler in Falkirk. There have been job losses on the ferries at Stranraer in Galloway. There has been a series of job losses in Dumfries and Prestwick and in the borders, my part of the country, we have seen unprecedented job losses. While the banana war continues in all its irrelevance between the United States and Europe, we suffer the consequence of hundreds of job losses in the cashmere sector.

It is important that we do not lose sight of any of those job losses when we are looking at the budget for Scottish Enterprise and how it may spend that money. When Lord Macdonald spoke to the Scottish Grand Committee he highlighted various weaknesses in the Scottish economy. He listed a poor level of business start-up, very low investment in research and development, low skills and zero population growth. He was eloquent in pointing out how we might address most of those issues, but, strangely, how to combat zero population growth was missing from the list of initiatives.

There can be no doubt that Scottish Trade International, which is a largely forgotten body in the economic development armoury of the Scottish Office, is an organisation that will have a greater role to play over the next 20 years. The themes of the Select Committee's visit to the United States were, time and again, the increasing need to take account of the knowledge-based economy and the fact that technology is changing very rapidly. Above all else, the Committee learnt that economies will have to adjust to mobile capital and the fact that businesses can very quickly move in and out of a country. Although Locate in Scotland has for years been very successful, we have to focus increasingly on outward investment, ensuring that Scottish companies receive as much assistance as possible in promoting their products and sales overseas.

Lord Macdonald also made much of the technology ventures initiative, which is examining ways in which Scottish Enterprise and other agencies may be able to help promote the growth of high-tech industries, which are critical to our future. The Scottish Office and Locate in Scotland have so far been successful in attracting Cadence to Scotland. Project Alba is examining ways of increasing our competence in chip technology systems and of expanding that knowledge base in Scotland. The project is very exciting but will require the support of a cluster of Scottish companies to make it successful.

I am concerned that, in Scotland, we are not yet sufficiently alert to the prospects of our financial sector or attuned to its needs. When the Committee was in the United States, we met a venture capitalist in Philadelphia who talked about establishing a European fund to provide capital to new, small high-tech companies. He plans to raise great sums to invest in Scotland, where he sees great potential. However, he does not foresee any great competition from Scottish venture capitalists. Perhaps Scottish Enterprise has more of a job on its hands than it has so far acknowledged.

This week, the Scottish Office made an announcement on establishing various business pathfinder groups to consider ways of promoting the Scottish Parliament to business and of ensuring that its Members and the Parliament's debates are attuned to business's needs and demands. That welcome initiative is directly relevant to

Scottish Enterprise. In the debate on devolution and on establishing the Parliament, the business community was initially atheistic about the Scottish Parliament. Business is now perhaps agnostic about the Parliament, but has not yet become evangelistic about it. Nevertheless, things are moving in the right direction, and anything that supports such movement is welcome.

I should be interested to hear the Minister address the issue of why, although Scottish Enterprise has identified oil, gas and electronics as key clusters in developing the Scottish economy, appropriate pathfinder groups are not being established. It is a strange omission.

There is much consensus on how the Scottish economy should be developed, although the issue will continue to be debated actively in the remaining few months until the elections in June and beyond. Nevertheless, when implementing its new strategy and using the new funds that we are considering today, Scottish Enterprise should consider the business culture in Scotland, especially the way in which we do or—more often—do not encourage entrepreneurship.

I am afraid that too many people become aware of the need for wealth creation and business creation, and of the fact that profit occasionally can be a good thing, long after they have left school and university. We cannot blame that situation on any one sector, but there is no doubt that teacher training and school and university curriculums do not address the issues of entrepreneurship and wealth creation, thereby creating a major gap in business education. We need look no further than that non-business culture to discover some of the reasons for our low start-up business rate. It is strange that successful business men and women are the exception rather than the rule when Scotland has produced so many over the generations. Over hundreds of years, Scots have proved their ability in international trade and business. We must not lose out because of a lack of far-sightedness from agencies such as Scottish Enterprise.

I agree with the hon. Member for Shettleston about the need to complete the M74 link from Tollcross to Kingston bridge. That highlights a wider issue for Scottish Enterprise and economic development throughout Scotland. It is incredible that Scottish Enterprise's remit does not include the need to establish or draw up a national infrastructure strategy. The Minister may say that different parts of the Scottish Office consider roads and rail. Some hon. Members are eagerly awaiting the announcement of those reviews in the next few weeks. From an economic development perspective, it is important in international competition for our major enterprise agencies to have a blueprint of the national infrastructure, covering rail, road, air and sea, that would best help to attract new businesses to Scotland and help indigenous companies to grow. IBM in Greenock is almost an indigenous company, but it is important when dealing with such global firms to keep Scotland competitive as a place to do business.

I referred earlier to the significant job losses that we have experienced in Scotland recently. I have argued for some time that there is a need to establish a rapid reaction unit in the Scottish Office to take account of problems as they strike a particular area. All hon. Members present today have their own experience of the Government's response to their local difficulties. I endorse and welcome all the efforts of the Borders working party. The direction in which the interim report is going is encouraging, as long as the funding—of which there may be some available after this debate—comes along in due course.

Crises have hit Scotland time and again. They are unpredictable. Nobody could have expected Wrangler to announce the closure of its business this week and nobody foresaw the trouble at Viasystems in the borders. We need teams that can be assembled in the Scottish Office at short notice with the remit and responsibility to draw up local action plans, bringing together transport and education requirements and industrial and economic development issues. Sadly, the Scottish Office is getting a lot of practice at that at the moment. There is a good case for making it a standing part of Scottish Office machinery, particularly at Scottish Enterprise.

I should like to refer briefly to the situation in the borders. I have already talked about the need for the Government to keep a watchful eye on the trade dispute. I acknowledge that the Scottish Office cannot sort that out on its own. I want to put on record my gratitude to Scottish Trade International and other bodies in the Scottish Office that have worked closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) and me on that. I also had a helpful meeting with the Minister for Trade this week. The potential impact of the loss of jobs in cashmere would be devastating. We have had many job losses in the borders and people are bleary at the prospect of more. We saw the problems in textiles and agriculture coming, but we are now being confronted by an issue that has nothing to do with the borders. It started as a trade war over bananas between the United States of America and the European Commission and somehow came home to roost in the borders. That is bad luck. We must be confident that the Scottish Office and Scottish Enterprise will continue to be behind the borders and will face up to the threat.

I understand that local enterprise companies in Scotland will learn of their budgetary allocations in the next few days. Indeed, it may even be as soon as tomorrow. I hope that the House will be told pretty quickly and not via a press release issued late on Friday evening. Those allocations are an important part of the debate on the Bill.

I remind the Minister of the commitment given by the Minister for Trade to support the £1 million down payment for the borders with further funding for specific projects in the local enterprise companies' budgets in the coming year. I hope that that pledge is about to be honoured.

The debate has focused on Scottish Enterprise, which is an important organisation. As hon. Members on both sides of the House have pointed out, it has a great deal of influence and potential for good around the country. We support the Bill and we hope that the new strategy for Scottish Enterprise proves to be the correct one, and that no one is carried away by talk of clusters and knowledge economies and forgets the problems that still face many people in Scotland.

5.31 pm

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): I am by no means desperate to catch a train, as the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) suggested. Indeed, I intend to use the opportunity of supporting the Scottish Enterprise Bill to highlight a number of local issues affecting Ayrshire—a place with which the hon. Gentleman may not be familiar.

[Ms Sandra Osborne]

If he listens, he may learn something about the recent problems and successes there. They emphasise the importance of the network that comprises Scottish Enterprise and the need for more resources which we hope will be made available shortly.

Scottish Enterprise has enjoyed a high profile this week. In the Scottish Grand Committee, the Minister made a statement on the new network strategy document; Sir Ian Wood gave evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee this week; and today we are debating the Scottish Enterprise Bill.

The Scottish Affairs Committee has been inquiring into inward and outward investment, and a number of issues have been raised. In addition to the visit to America—rather than repeating any of the points that have been made, I shall simply say that I concur with the views of my colleagues on the Select Committee—there have been several visits to Scotland. We have taken evidence in the borders and in Dundee and I am pleased to say that we shall shortly visit Ayr to hear about the problems affecting inward investment and tourism in my constituency.

I believe that the Select Committee will produce an extremely helpful report. Some of the comments that have been made today are relevant, although I would not dream of pre-empting our recommendations or making them before the publication of the report. One issue raised during our inquiry concerned the potential problems associated with having a number of different agencies dealing with economic development and competing for inward investment. That can occur nationally and locally. I shall briefly describe the approach adopted in Ayrshire, which is a good example of how local players can work together to achieve a coherent strategic approach.

The Ayrshire economic forum is a partnership drawn from the three local authorities: Ayrshire chamber of commerce and industry, the Scottish Trades Union Council and Enterprise Ayrshire. For the past two years the forum has been working towards a new economic development strategy for Ayrshire. However, it has been overtaken by recent events, particularly a number of redundancies announced by significant companies such as Volvo, Digital, Prestwick Circuits, Sweater Shop, Sports Division and Butlins. Following those redundancies, the Minister addressed the forum and called for an action plan for jobs in Ayrshire. He said his involvement reflected the Government's concern and commitment to support areas facing structural economic change. I was pleased that he was involved.

It is clear that Ayrshire is an area facing such changes, and that there is a need for new businesses in Ayrshire and further diversification of the economic base. The economic forum will shortly publish an action plan for jobs, and will drive that forward with Scottish Office involvement. Again, that is a positive move on the part of the Scottish Office.

The action plan for jobs will be set in the context of the existing Enterprise Ayrshire business plan, the economic development plans of the local authorities and the Scottish Enterprise network strategy. That has been possible because the forum is a genuine partnership in which all the agencies work together.

The changes that are impacting on the Ayrshire economy are deep-seated and are affecting a wide range of sectors such as electronics, engineering, textiles and retail distribution. In the past, those sectors have contributed a great deal to Ayrshire's economic prosperity. We have a highly self-contained labour market, with 96 per cent. of Ayrshire jobs taken by Ayrshire residents. Tackling structural change in Ayrshire's economy therefore continues to be our overriding priority.

The pace of economic change, along with the wave of redundancies to which I referred, means that the current resources available to Enterprise Ayrshire and its local authority partners leave them running fast to stand still. The action plan for jobs must, therefore, be underpinned by the availability of additional resources. I am sure that the House will forgive me for making my bid for Ayrshire in the same way as others have made bids for their local area.

The work done by the forum does not suggest a quick-fix strategy—it is a detailed plan for the future, with concrete proposals that will create jobs. It builds on Ayrshire's considerable existing assets, which include the extension of the M77 and Glasgow Prestwick international airport—which continues to achieve substantial growth in its freight and passenger business, and does a great deal, as we heard on our trip to north America, to support the development of the Scottish electronics industry.

The presence of nationally significant development sites is also an advantage. As well as the area surrounding Prestwick airport, we have Riverside in Irvine and Rowallan in Kilmarnock. These represent future potential, and are areas on which we hope to build. We also have international research institutions in Ayrshire, such as the Hannah research institute, the Scottish agricultural college and the higher education facilities at Ayr campus of Paisley university, which are developing positively.

I am sure that everyone in the House will recognise that Ayrshire is a beautiful part of the country with a natural environment that provides an exceptional quality of life, which I recommend to all hon. Members—including the hon. Member for West Dorset. Despite those assets, however, Ayrshire's road and rail links will continue to require substantial investment if they are to meet future business needs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) has emphasised, we will need to target areas of acute disadvantage and join in the Government's existing efforts to tackle social exclusion.

The action plan will have ambitious targets to create thousands of jobs over five years, but there has been a deliberate aim that the targets should be realistic and achievable. That is very important for local credibility. People often hear of action plans, task forces and working parties being set up, but they do not always see tangible results. There is a real, determined effort to make sure that there are tangible achievements after five years.

There has been also some good news in Ayrshire recently, with a number of announcements about inward investment—for example, Universal Scientific Industries creating 700 jobs in Irvine—and there have been positive views from local companies.

I want to highlight the work of the Prestwick task force, which was set up specifically to address aviation issues involving Prestwick airport and the surrounding aerospace companies. One of the crucial elements in its success has been the involvement of the national and multinational

companies surrounding the airport. They have participated with great enthusiasm and have co-operated to the benefit of the whole area as well as themselves.

The final report, published in December, is a testament to how a collaborative approach can produce results. Only 18 months ago, when British Aerospace announced that production at Jetstream would cease at Prestwick, the banner headlines were all about the devastation of the Ayrshire economy. Now the talk is about Prestwick as a leading aerospace cluster on the world stage and about the continuing growth of traffic, especially freight cargo, at Prestwick airport.

The task force set itself eight targets. They have all been fully achieved or are well on the way to being achieved and have been picked up by other bodies. Alternative employment has been found for the majority of Jetstream workers affected by the closure, and all 270 aerostructure jobs at British Aerospace, which were at risk, have now been secured. In addition, more than 600 jobs have been created or are planned for the Prestwick area.

Locate in Scotland undertook a marketing exercise in north America highlighting the advantages of Prestwick as a location for aerospace companies. I agree with what other hon. Members have said about Locate in Scotland's work, which we witnessed when we were in America. The work done for Prestwick has resulted so far in 15 active leads that are currently being pursued. The airport recently opened a new purpose-built airfreight facility with support from Enterprise Ayrshire.

Some outstanding issues were highlighted by the task force report and were agreed by all the partners in the Ayrshire economic forum to be crucial to the further development of the Ayrshire economy. Those issues are extremely relevant to the work of Enterprise Ayrshire.

Improvements are needed to the roads infrastructure. Like other hon. Members, I will make a bid for the upgrading of the A77 to be completed. That is crucial to future development in Ayrshire. We will also pursue assisted area status. It will come as no surprise to hon. Members when I mention the vital importance of the completion of the new Scottish air traffic control centre at Prestwick, which will provide hundreds of high-quality jobs. The current centre is already a major contributor to the local economy. We must have progress on the contract. That is not directly the responsibility of Enterprise Ayrshire or Scottish Enterprise, but I am sure that they would agree that it is absolutely crucial to the local economy.

We need progress on fifth freedom rights for Prestwick airport. I am pleased that the Government have recently shown more flexibility and have granted fifth freedom rights to Polar Air Cargo at Prestwick, uniquely without a reciprocal arrangement from the United States Department of Transportation. That is real progress and it was certainly not achieved by the previous Government. In the long term we need a final agreement on fifth freedom cargo rights, which will bring significant benefits to Prestwick and indeed the whole of Scotland. We will continue to press for that.

It is clear that only a certain amount can be achieved locally and we are very dependent on national action and support to further our aims. A wider economic framework obviously determines how effective the enterprise companies can be locally, and general economic conditions have a major impact on the prospects for any one area.

It is ironic that, despite everything else that I have said, unemployment in the Ayr constituency has dropped by 30 per cent. since December 1996. We warmly welcome that, but there is no room for complacency, and the figures hold no consolation for those who lose their jobs through redundancy. We must stick to a long-term strategy, both locally and nationally, to create stable and lasting jobs and make available training opportunities to help people into new employment. I am pleased that, unlike the previous Government, this Government have not washed their hands of redundancies in my area and Ministers have been willing to get involved. The role of Scottish Enterprise and local enterprise companies has also been crucial, because they are a concrete way in which the Government can ensure that they do not wash their hands of difficult situations.

All hon. Members present will no doubt wish to see applied to their area a fair share of the considerable resources that will be available to Scottish Enterprise. As my hon. Friends have said, we wish to see resources concentrated in areas of greatest need. That is important for Scotland, but was not done in the past 18 years. Ayrshire's case for more resources is sound and we will make a good case when the action plans for jobs are produced shortly. I trust that Scottish Enterprise will respond positively to our requests and our bid for increased funding.

5.46 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne), who is a member of the Committee on which I have the privilege to serve and who represents the town of my school days.

Before I deal with the subject of the Bill, will you first indulge me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by allowing me to get a point of frustration and irritation off my chest? It is not the fact that I am unable to put in a bid for Scottish Enterprise money for New Forest, West, but the fact that, as is my custom, I rose early, swam quarter of a mile in the Serpentine and cycled to the Palace of Westminster. As a consequence of the business that must necessarily take place before the Chamber sits, I went straight into a series of meetings. Since business in the Chamber began, I have been in my place. At 5.46 pm, I rise to speak, feeling faint because I have scarcely had a moment to eat a banana and a mouthful of soup. The new arrangements for Thursday are inhumane and barbaric.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman is feeling faint and has not had a decent meal. However, I have had a decent meal and I wish to hear what he has to say on Scottish Enterprise, not on the arrangements of the House.

Mr. Swayne: In that case, hon. Members may welcome the fact that this is the last programmed Scottish Bill before the Scottish Parliament takes over Scottish business.

If one were to be partisan and make party political points, one might draw attention to the fact that the budget for training and Scottish Enterprise was cut by some £67 million in the comprehensive spending review. Were someone to make such a point, Labour Members would no doubt respond by saying that the previous

[Mr. Swayne]

Secretary of State cut the budget. However, Conservative Members would say that he did so only with the agreement of the chairman of Scottish Enterprise and that, within a year, the value of the cut had been more than restored. I wish to move on from such sterile ground in this age of new politics and consensus and to question the fundamental basis of the Bill.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) made some pertinent points about the balance of investment between the need to secure more indigenous investment and the acquisition of more capital investment from overseas. I wish to go further and raise questions about the fundamental assumptions underpinning the Bill.

My first point relates to the expensive pursuit of overseas capital. The balance of payments must, of necessity, balance. The number of potatoes sold at the prices charged must be equal to the number of potatoes bought at the prices paid. Any imbalance in the balance of trade in the current account must be made up for by an equal and opposite imbalance under another item in the current account, or by an equal and opposite imbalance in the overall capital account.

Both the British and the Scottish economies are familiar with that fundamental concept. For a long period during the 19th century, and during this one, the Scottish economy and that of the whole United Kingdom ran a huge surplus on current account, made up of a deficit on the balance of trade masked by a huge surplus on invisible earnings. Strangely, even at the height of the industrial revolution, when Glasgow was the workshop of the world, we ran a deficit on our balance of trade.

The statistics of the 19th century are not entirely clear, and the evidence is not always obvious. At the beginning of the 19th century, our collection of statistics was not as sophisticated as it is now. However, it is questionable whether the United Kingdom ever ran a balance of trade surplus during that century. As a result, our current account surplus was made up of a huge surplus on invisibles, largely because of the shipping industry. The balance of trade was affected by the fact that the motor of our economic development—the cotton industry—relied almost wholly on an imported raw product.

Of necessity, the huge surplus on the current account led to an equal and opposite outflow on the capital account. Britain had to export capital to make its trading partners able to afford to continue to trade with us. On the back of that fact, British capital ended up building railways throughout the rest of Europe and in north America. A lasting legacy is that we retain the lead in the world, including the United States, as the largest per capita owners of overseas capital.

If there is a persistent balance of payments deficit, it must equally be met by a capital inflow. One cannot go on buying from a shop—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is losing me, perhaps because I am not as well-versed as he in the economics of the 19th century. We must home in on the Second Reading of the Bill, which is about enterprise and new towns in Scotland. The hon. Gentleman seems to be speaking more about the economy of the UK as a whole.

Mr. Swayne: One of the principal functions of Scottish Enterprise and its partnership with Locate in Scotland will be to attract inward investment. The point that I seek to make, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that one cannot go on buying from a shop without having some source of income. I have pointed out the necessity of equal and opposite matching outward capital flows where a country runs a persistent current account surplus, or inward capital flows where a country runs a persistent balance of payments deficit. Capital inflow is an automatic consequence of the state of the current and capital accounts of the balance of payments. My question concerns the wisdom of making the expensive pursuit of foreign investment a priority. Obviously, it is a matter of balance. There is a measure of automation in the process, yet we seem to be investing a great deal to short-circuit and do the work that the logic of economic theory would ordinarily do for us.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that, if Locate in Scotland did not pursue its activities, for example, all that inward investment would still come to Scotland and would not be attracted to Ireland by, say, the Irish Industrial Development Agency?

Mr. Swayne: I am making a case for having a balance. Obviously, one must have a view as to the type of investment that one wants. After all, one would not want merely to attract screwdriver plants; one must have a qualitative attitude to the sort of investment that comes in. The hon. Gentleman is right in identifying the fact that economic logic requires a certain amount of inward investment.

Mrs. Fyfe: The hon. Gentleman talks as though depressed areas can easily pick and choose where investment comes from. Industry disappeared from the area that I represent decades ago. Maryhill was at the heart of the industrial revolution and all that industry has gone. Frankly, if an investor from Mars were offering jobs in Maryhill, I would take up the offer.

Mr. Swayne: I hope that the hon. Lady will be successful in that bid for inward investment. I was talking not so much of the ability to pick and choose as of the logic of economic theory, which would require inward investment.

Another aspect of the work of Scottish Enterprise is that of the funds that it maintains to provide venture or seedcorn capital for business start-ups that would otherwise not be able to secure such funds. By its very nature, that is a risky business and it leads to a significant element of loss. Arguably, that is of necessity so. Indeed, if the figures for Scottish Enterprise did not show such losses, it could be argued that it was not doing its job properly by providing for industries that would otherwise not be able to secure such capital and so would never start up. There has to be a balance, but I am not wholly persuaded by the argument.

However, I do not want to go into that. I want to question why Scottish Enterprise finds itself in that position at all. Many years ago, there were agencies for

providing such capital. It is all very well for us to complain that the banks do not fulfil that role, but it was never their role to provide venture capital. In the great age of Glasgow—the industrial revolution—the main source of capital for risky enterprises was from within an entrepreneur's own family. Why has that source of capital almost completely disappeared throughout the realm? One cannot blame it on new Labour even if, in this age of consensus and new politics, one were minded to do so. That situation arose not only in this century but in the past century—

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Is not the answer simple? It is due to the failure of wealth to cascade down the generations.

Mr. Swayne: My hon. Friend has a pertinent point. As the state has taken on a series of activities, it has displaced—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman has to say, in particular about the history of my native city, Glasgow, but he must be more specific. He must deal with the Bill, not wander through the economic problems of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Swayne: Thank you for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You will be relieved to hear that I am drawing to my peroration. The point that I am seeking to make is that we are about to provide an agency that already spends a great deal of public money with an additional £1 billion. I am questioning the necessity of that process.

Mr. Letwin: I want to ask my hon. Friend a question that is absolutely specific to Scottish Enterprise and that I neglected to draw to the attention of the Minister earlier. Is he aware that of the approximately £3 billion that Scottish Enterprise has so far consumed, total investments—apart from those in property—amount to some £51 million, showing that some £2.95 billion has not gone into investments currently held?

Mr. Swayne: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which is highly pertinent at this time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) pointed out that, as the state has taken on greater and greater activities for itself, it has displaced the activity and responsibility that would otherwise have come from individuals and their families. The state has reduced the incentive to save by funding such activities through taxing savings, income and, very importantly, inheritance—so much so that the diffusion of wealth throughout the population no longer exists to fund the activities of venture capital. That is why this Bill which requires the state to provide funding is before us today.

6.2 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): Follow that, as they say. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne), let me tell the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) that I shall be catching a train this evening and, like Cinderella, hope to be home before midnight.

I welcome the opportunity to support the Scottish Enterprise Bill which will provide financial cover for various activities over the next two years. Thereafter, as has been said, that will become the responsibility of our Scottish Parliament. Naturally those resources filter down to local areas. For an area such as my constituency, which has seen significant job losses over recent months, any additional support that may flow from these moneys will be welcome. Hon. Members have spoken of the major role played by Scottish Enterprise and, like them, I welcome the new network strategy document that was announced earlier this week by my noble Friend Lord Macdonald of Tradeston.

Only this week 20 job losses in heavy engineering and a further 80 job losses in the polyester film manufacturing business in my constituency were announced. The ICI site that offered about 800 manufacturing jobs during the summer of 1997 will by the middle of this year offer only 350 jobs. The collapse of the Asian market and the decision of multinational companies to change their portfolios and abandon certain manufacturing sectors can have a devastating effect on rural areas. Dumfries, Galloway and the Scottish borders have felt some of these devastating consequences during the past 12 months.

Given that in recent months we have had about 600 job losses announced in my locality, it comes as a surprise to many people that unemployment figures do not show significant increases. I do not want to play down job losses because losing a job is a personal tragedy for anyone. However, far from the significant job losses being shown in an increase in unemployment, compared with this time last year, the statistics show a 3.7 per cent. reduction in people seeking employment and claiming jobseeker's allowance; compared with two years ago, the reduction is 20.4 per cent.

After the numerous job losses, my noble Friend Lord Macdonald of Tradeston visited our locality.

Mr. Moore: I know that the hon. Gentleman will develop his point, but does he agree, given our similar experiences of rural issues in the south of Scotland—the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) is also here—that when people lose their jobs, they are forced to leave the area? That artificially suppresses the unemployment rate. Does he agree that many of the worst recent job announcements have yet to kick directly into the statistics?

Mr. Brown: I agree to some extent. People in the hon. Gentleman's area may leave the locality to seek employment elsewhere, but that is not necessarily so in my constituency. He said that some job losses had yet to kick in, but my figures relate to people who have become unemployed and are a true reflection of what is happening.

The position has undoubtedly been helped by the excellent performance of Dumfries and Galloway enterprise company. Like so many such companies, its assistance is welcome in difficult times. Rural areas cannot attract inward investors who would bring 400 or 500 jobs at a stroke to one place. I therefore believe that it is even more important for the local enterprise company to spread its financial resources over as wide a variety of activities as possible.

According to its most recent annual report, my local enterprise company, which also covers the constituency of the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale

[Mr. Brown]

(Mr. Morgan), provided information and assistance to 247 companies and helped 271 businesses to start up. The general public often miss such figures. It assisted 45 exporting companies and advised four potential inward investors. It supported 28 food, 27 forestry and 73 tourism businesses.

In such a large rural area, the importance of the ability to support 750 companies in training their staff cannot be overstated. Such training, in programmes such as skill seekers and training for work, helped some 230 long-term unemployed people attain employment. That is an excellent step forward for those who have fought so long and hard to find employment. It is also worth mentioning that 20 companies committed to the Investors in People standard during that year.

Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise is involved directly in the delivery of the new deal in my area. As a member of the strategic partnership formed to deliver the initiative, it is leading on the management and delivery of the employment option and the full-time training and education option. It sees its role in the new deal as an increasingly important part of the economic inclusion activity.

I mentioned previously that 271 new businesses had started up. That element of entrepreneurship continues to be a strong feature of the local economy in rural areas. Rural areas depend on small and medium-sized businesses. The launch of a new business start-up programme has proved invaluable to so many people who have been seeking opportunities to start a business.

The importance of tourism in rural areas can be shown by the numbers employed in that sector. Almost 10 per cent. of the area's work force is employed in the industry and last year we saw the development of a partnership that established our area's first integrated tourism strategy, in which a comprehensive vision for the industry's development was set out.

The ability to offer market research, exhibition support and overseas promotional literature assisted the previously mentioned 45 exporting businesses in the locality. In what is clearly recognised as a difficult time for export companies, the enterprise company's intervention is expected to have led to a growth in direct sales of just less than £1 million. That activity, along with other activities that my hon. Friends and hon. Members have mentioned in the realms of property and environmental improvements, as well as assistance to a significant number of property-based initiatives, has shown just what can be done in rural areas by local enterprise companies.

The Bill offers the opportunity to support through Scottish Enterprise a significant amount of economic activity that might otherwise never happen. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House see fit to support it.

6.11 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I am rather amazed to find myself talking at this hour about the Scottish Enterprise Bill.

Mr. David Marshall: So are we.

Mr. Robertson: With a name like Robertson, I am perhaps entitled to offer one or two words on the Bill. When I looked at the Bill I was even more amazed. The thing that caught my eye was the extraordinary amount of money that we are talking about—not just the extra £1 billion but the almost £3 billion that has already been spent. I welcome the removal of Ministers' ability to increase the amounts by statutory instrument, but I want to make a short speech that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) might describe as a probing speech. I wish to ask a few questions and seek clarification.

I am concerned that responsibility for Scottish Enterprise will pass to the Scottish Parliament. It is not a matter of whether the Scots, the English, the Welsh or people from Northern Ireland are competent to deal with their own affairs, but the amount of money is so enormous that it inevitably comes from the United Kingdom taxpayer. Should not the United Kingdom Parliament have some control over it? If Labour Members feel that the money is well spent and benefits the people of Scotland to such an extent, would they be happy for the people of Scotland to provide it in its entirety? If they are, I suggest that the Scottish Parliament would need to increase the tax in Scotland by more than the 3p in the pound by which it is entitled to increase tax. I wonder whether it would have been better to delay introduction of the Bill until the Scottish Parliament was up and running. The responsibilities would have been clearer.

Mrs. Fyfe: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that so far he is presenting only one half of the equation? If all the investment effort is successful, the jobless figures will fall and therefore unemployment benefit costs will fall, which will benefit the United Kingdom taxpayer.

Mr. Robertson: If that happens, that may well be the case. I have probably presented only one half of the equation because I am only a quarter of the way through my speech. Who will pay? The hon. Lady makes a good point. Will Scottish Enterprise be self-financing? What returns can we expect from the new companies that are created which otherwise would not have been created? That has to be the question. What will they contribute in terms of corporation tax, job creation and jobs retained—which is important—and in terms of inward investment attracted? In other words, is this money well spent?

I wish to put the amount into context. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset mentioned the number of nurses who could be employed by the extra money. The £4 billion over the period in question would run the health service for quite a few weeks. The health service employs about 1 million people. In that context, the figures quoted this afternoon are not impressive.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Bill will not increase the sum available to the Scottish Parliament because that is clearly laid down by the Scotland Act 1998 and the Barnett formula? If the Scottish Parliament finds that money, it will be at the expense of other items of expenditure. The hon. Gentleman appears to want the House to supervise the Scottish budget in total.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. It is not in order to go down that track. We must

concentrate on the Bill before us, not the wider issue, which has already been raised once in the debate and which I hoped I had expelled.

Mr. Robertson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for rescuing me from going down a complicated path.

May I put the £4 billion in another context? I was saying how many people it could help and how long it could run the health service, for example, which employs 1 million people; but given that the entire population of Scotland over the age of 16 numbers just over 4 million and the economically active population is only 2.5 million, it seems an extraordinarily large sum to spend on such a small work force. That is not to undervalue that work force; my argument is whether it is money well spent. The money might be better spent elsewhere, as the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) might have been suggesting, or perhaps left in the pocket of the taxpayer, who knows how to spend it better than Governments.

A number of differing figures have been quoted this afternoon. They also differ from the figures that I shall give. In an earlier intervention I quoted the chief executive of Scottish Enterprise. I shall do so again for the benefit of hon. Members who were not in the Chamber then. He claimed in the annual report that Scottish Enterprise has helped to attract inward investment of £1 billion, and created or retained 18,000 jobs and 36,000 training places. Yet he says:

"Scotland . . . still lags behind the rest of the UK in the number of businesses emerging".

The chairman of Scottish Enterprise, Sir Ian Wood, says that Scottish Enterprise has

"added £600 million to Scotland's GDP."

Those figures may sound impressive, but compared with what Scottish Enterprise has cost, they are not impressive at all. The agency has not moved Scotland on very far. Will the Minister assure us that the money will be well spent and will result in gains to Scotland that are proportionate to the cost of the schemes?

Mr. Moore: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that economic development is not a valid purpose for Government expenditure, or is he contending, by contrast, that Scottish Enterprise is particularly inefficient in terms of economic development? If it is the latter, what benchmark is he using to make that suggestion?

Mr. Robertson: I have used a number of benchmarks, the best of which is the fact that the chairman of Scottish Enterprise, Sir Ian Wood, says that it has added £600 million to Scotland's GDP. However, if one averages out what the agency has cost since its creation, that £600 million is not impressive. One must ask how much of it would have existed had the money not been spent in the first place.

I shall bring my remarks to a close because I am interested in hearing the Minister's response. Will he assure us that the value for money of Scottish Enterprise will be constantly monitored?

6.19 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I shall try to keep my remarks brief. Whenever I have participated in Scottish debates in the past and told the House that I would be brief, I have usually succeeded in keeping to that undertaking.

It is a great pleasure to participate in this debate and to have listened to it. During the long passage of the devolution Bill, when I spent many long hours on the Benches, I realised how much one learns about issues concerning places other than one's own constituency when one bothers to attend debates in this Chamber.

I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will allow me to go slightly beyond the Bill, because I want to refer to the necessity for Members of Parliament to be kept informed of what goes on nationwide. I am satisfied that the Bill should commend itself to the House, and I accept that Scottish Enterprise has been beneficial in Scotland, so I have no objection to raising the limits.

However, the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) about the lack of past scrutiny of the activities of Scottish Enterprise are perfectly valid. The House has previously discussed the problem of our ability to scrutinise every aspect of Government activity. I suspect that the Scottish Parliament may also have that problem, especially if every day it packs up at 5 o'clock in the afternoon—it is now a quarter past six. Bills should not be allowed to be nodded through. They require explanation, and I hope that the Minister will deal with my hon. Friend's points, if only briefly, when he winds up the debate.

Some issues go beyond the Bill, which I am told is the last we shall consider before the Scottish Parliament comes into being. Finance is at the root of what makes a unified nation state. We all have concerns about one another's finances. During the devolution debate, and even this evening, I heard enough compelling speeches, such as that of the hon. Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) about the particular needs of her constituency, to know that there is competition nationally for the allocation of funds. If any issue is to cause problems and dissent when the Scottish Parliament is established, it will be finance.

I listen to Government Members who represent English constituencies, particularly in the north-west. It is clear that, even though this money may come from the block grant, the block grant itself will be up for consideration far more frequently once the Scottish Parliament is established. Therefore, those of us who believe in the Union—that applies across the Benches—argue that continuing, adequate information should be provided to hon. Members about how money is spent north of the border after the Scottish Parliament comes into being. If it is not provided, that will be a fertile area of misunderstanding. New mechanisms will have to be established in this Parliament so that we can be given that information.

Mr. Dalyell: What mechanisms would the hon. Gentleman like to see? This is a serious point.

Mr. Grieve: We shall have to look beyond the existing Select Committee system to provide mechanisms for frequent contact between Members of the House and Members of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, for the exchange of information, if not on a statutory basis then according to growing conventions, and for relevant Ministers to explain to hon. Members whether they are satisfied with the way in which expenditure is being handled north of the border. I do not see that as unwarranted interference, because Members of the Scottish Parliament should be entitled to obtain answers on those aspects through representatives at Westminster on issues that concern England alone.

[Mr. Grieve]

As these new mechanisms come into being, I should like to see them work. I hope that the hon. Members present who were also present during the devolution debate are aware that I want the new system to succeed, even if I have reservations about it. I hope that the Minister will take my comments on board, because without such mechanisms an interesting debate will not happen and misunderstandings will build up. That will ultimately threaten the Union, so we must get the exchange of financial information right.

6.24 pm

Mr. Macdonald: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Despite its technical start, the debate has been interesting. I think that the point on which the debate concluded is the point that began it, but I shall deal with that later, when I respond to what was said by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin).

The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) asked why we could not delay the whole business until the Scottish Parliament was up and running. The purpose of the Bill, however, is to enable Scottish Enterprise to continue its operations until the Parliament is up and running. If it is not presented and passed, Scottish Enterprise cannot do that. I think we all agree that it is important for Scottish Enterprise to continue its work. We have extended the limit for a minimal period, so that the Parliament can decide on future arrangements when it has been established.

The hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) mentioned reductions in support for training. Under the new deal, an extra £300 million is being spent in Scotland over the lifetime of this Parliament—much more than was available to Scottish Enterprise before. Indeed, this is the biggest training programme in peacetime history.

The hon. Gentleman also made a plea for balance in terms of efforts to attract inward investment. Scottish Enterprise tries to maintain that balance. It may interest the hon. Gentleman to learn that less than 10 per cent. of Scottish Enterprise's operational expenditure is devoted to inward investment and the attraction of such investment; the rest is devoted to companies that are already operating in Scotland.

My hon. Friends the Members for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) and for Ayr (Ms Osborne) made a number of important points, especially in regard to the difficulties and challenges that exist in their constituencies. Those points will be drawn to the attention of my noble Friend the Minister for Business and Industry, who will note them with interest. As both my hon. Friends will know, my noble Friend recently met representatives from Dumfries and Galloway, and expects to meet representatives again in the next month or so. Many of the points that have been raised can be pursued then. The Scottish Office has now joined the Ayrshire economic forum. My noble Friend attended the forum's last meeting before the end of last year, and will attend the next on 25 January.

The hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) welcomed the action plan drawn up for the borders, and I welcome his positive comments. He suggested that the plan could provide a model or template for the future, and I agree that there are lessons to be drawn from the necessary speed with which Scottish Enterprise responded to the crisis in the borders. I certainly think that the way in which the action plan was put together by the working party provides a model from which we can learn lessons for the future.

The hon. Gentleman also emphasised the importance of infrastructure to economic development. Infrastructure is important for the borders, and also for my part of Scotland. It is taken into account in the current roads review, and the hon. Gentleman can be assured that officials from the Department that deals with transport, who are working on that review, try to consider the economic impact and the benefits of the various roads proposals. They are always grateful for the advice and information that they receive from Scottish Enterprise and from officials in the Department of Trade and Industry, so the communication that he was looking for is there.

The hon. Member for West Dorset raised a number of issues. Essentially, he asked questions about the value for money achieved through expenditure on Scottish Enterprise. He had particular queries and points in that respect, but he also couched the matter in a larger question about scrutiny of Scottish Enterprise post devolution.

As regards the first point, I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on the specific points that he made. Scottish Enterprise has not escaped scrutiny. In 1996, the National Audit Office published a report on Scottish Enterprise following a two-year review by the NAO that was obviously extremely thorough. It made several points to Scottish Enterprise. I think that the balance of them was positive in terms of the frame of controls that Scottish Enterprise has established to secure value for money.

The hon. Gentleman noted that the Public Accounts Committee had not conducted its own investigation of Scottish Enterprise, but the NAO conducted that thorough review, which was presented to the PAC. I do not know the practical reason why the PAC did not take that further, but one assumes that it was because it was satisfied with the outcome of the NAO report, Therefore, I hope that the hon. Gentleman can take reassurance from that and will rest his case not on any fears that Scottish Enterprise is not achieving value for money, but on the wider constitutional points that he made.

Mr. Letwin: Of course the Minister is right that my main point is a constitutional one and about the future, rather than a financial point and about the past, but does he accept that the NAO report is interesting in that it looks in painstaking detail at the way in which the moneys that were disbursed, after administrative expenses and so forth, were used, and whether value for money was achieved in terms of cost per job? It also, I should add, examined internal auditing controls; I am not and have never suggested any impropriety and the NAO found none. However, does he agree that the report does not look at all closely at whether the organisation is, as a financial enterprise, running its internal affairs efficiently? Is that not surprising?

Mr. Macdonald: That is a point that the hon. Gentleman could take up with the NAO. Certainly the tone of the report is one of general satisfaction with the operations of Scottish Enterprise. Unless we know

otherwise, we would do better in this Chamber to emphasise that positive side, albeit the hon. Gentleman wants to make those wider points about scrutiny. It would only be fair if, here, we accepted that the NAO issued a generally positive report on Scottish Enterprise, and we can only assume that it found favour with the Public Accounts Committee as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall) made the point that, during the Select Committee visit to north America, it heard glowing testimony of the high regard in which Scottish Enterprise is held in north America because of the nature and quality of its work and the way in which it is perceived. I agree with what he said about Scottish Enterprise strategy and I find nothing to disagree with his points about Glasgow in general. I agree particularly with the fact that we need to address the problems of Glasgow, not just through the efforts of Scottish Enterprise, but through other measures such as the new deal, social inclusion partnerships and so on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shettleston also mentioned the subject of brown-field sites in Glasgow which, quite rightly, he raises frequently. The treatment of such sites is important and my hon. Friend will be reassured to know that £3 million has been ring-fenced specifically for the development of brown-field sites in Glasgow.

The future oversight of Scottish Enterprise will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament. It will be one of the agencies under the Scottish Executive. The Scottish Executive and its agencies will be held to account by the Parliament. One would assume that the Parliament will have its own audit committee, which, like the Public Accounts Committee, will play an active and powerful role in the life of that Parliament. From April next year, responsibility for auditing Scottish Enterprise will transfer to the auditor-general for Scotland. That may not answer the deeper questions about devolution that were asked by the hon. Member for West Dorset, but I believe that those are just points of disagreement between both sides of the House about the merits of devolution and the need to achieve it.

Mr. Letwin: Without entering the depths of the dispute, if there is one, will the hon. Gentleman clarify a point? Is he saying that, it is the Government's view that, following devolution and in the light of the audit arrangements which he no doubt correctly says will be established by the Scottish Parliament, there should be no opportunity for oversight by this House or this Parliament of the use of funds by agencies which come under the Scottish Parliament.?

Mr. Macdonald: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be free to make his own speeches after devolution and to raise any points that he wishes with the Government of the day about how that Government are spending their money. It is a firm view on the Labour Benches that those responsibilities and duties should be transferred to the Scottish Parliament and, in our view, it will be the responsibility of that Parliament to fulfil them.

Mr. Letwin: I am sorry to interrupt again; this will be my last intervention. Can the Minister tell us how far he intends to press that point? Is he saying that, even if there are suggestions in this House that moneys voted by this House through the block grant to the Scottish Parliament are being ill-used, he and his colleagues do not intend to set up any specific mechanism to enable the taxpayers of the United Kingdom, as represented in this House, to investigate that?

Mr. Macdonald: I am confident that the Scottish Parliament will be able to acquit its financial duties and its responsibility for oversight of the agencies every bit as competently as the current Parliament and Government are able to do. As I have said, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will be able to make their own speeches and raise their own points in their own way post-devolution. I hope that he will at least accept that, within the Parliament, there will be a powerful mechanism for ensuring proper oversight of those agencies.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to respond to this debate. Although it is a technical Bill, it has raised some interesting issues. As I explained at the beginning of my speech, the Bill is intended simply to raise the aggregate limit for Scottish Enterprise to allow it to continue its important work, which I am grateful to note has received cross-party support. I commend the measure to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

SCOTTISH ENTERPRISE BILL [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Scottish Enterprise Bill ("the Act"), it is expedient to authorise—

(1) any payment out of the National Loans Fund, the Consolidated Fund or money provided by Parliament resulting from increasing by the Act, to an amount not exceeding £4,000 million, the aggregate amount which is permitted to be outstanding, otherwise than by way of interest, in respect of the items mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (d) of section 25(2) of the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act 1990; and

(2) any increase, resulting from such increase, in the sums payable into the National Loans Fund or the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Evercreech Primary School

6.40 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I should like to present, and offer my support for, a petition that I was given earlier this week at Evercreech primary school. I am grateful to the school's staff, children and governors for the welcome that they gave me. The petition has been signed by 250 people resident in Evercreech and in the surrounding district of Somerset, including the area's county councillor, Mrs. Gloria Cawood.

The petition states:

The number of pupils attending Evercreech Primary School, and the continuing popularity of the school, is such that class sizes are unacceptably large, and that one class now has 38 children, to the detriment of the educational opportunities offered to local children.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House will take such matters as lie within their powers to urge that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment ensures that such resources are available to Somerset County Council as may be required to provide an extra permanent classroom and one extra teacher for Evercreech Primary School.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound will ever pray etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Parish and Town Councils

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

6.41 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to have the opportunity to initiate this Adjournment debate. I start from the premise of a belief that often the importance of parish and town councils—or, as I shall refer to them, local councils—is undervalued and that the advantages that they offer, not only to their own community but as the basis of representative government, is underestimated.

I should immediately declare an interest: I am a local councillor. I have been a Stonehouse town councillor for the past 12 years, and shall remain a local councillor if those in power will select and re-elect me.

I realise that I am not the only hon. Member who has the onerous responsibility of being a local councillor. My hon. Friend the Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) is a parish councillor in his constituency, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) is president of the Durham Association of Local Councils. Recently, I became a vice-president of the National Association of Local Councils. The Minister for Local Government and Housing once filled that position with distinction. It is interesting how we hon. Members begin our careers.

I should like to give my thanks to all those who have served with me in local government. I should certainly like to thank my own councillors on Stonehouse town council and the two clerks who have been with the council for the past 12 years. I thank also all the other town councils with which I have had contact both before and especially since I was elected to the House.

My constituency has 48 parish and town councils, consisting of the five town councils of Stonehouse, Dursley, Nailsworth, Stroud and Berkeley; 41 parish councils, which vary in size from Cam—which my old friend, Councillor Brian Addle, always assures me is the biggest parish in Gloucestershire—to very small parishes, such as Brookthorpe-with-Whaddon, Standish, Elmore and Miserden. Finally, but not least, it has two parish meetings—which hon. Members who know about such matters will realise comprise the lowest level of representative democracy and meet only very occasionally, when the need arises—at Moreton Valence and Owlpen.

I should like to make special mention of two people who have helped me to compile my notes for this speech: Stephen Wright, the secretary of the Gloucestershire Association of Town and Parish Councils, who doubles as the director of the Gloucestershire rural community council; and Robin Wendt, the chief executive of the National Association of Local Councils.

Local councils tend to be seen as the lowest and least form of democracy and are sometimes parodied as something of a French farce. In "The Vicar of Dibley" they are portrayed as not as serious as they could be. It is easy to think of local councils in that way, but those who serve on them regard their role as important. Although it is not always easy to get people to serve, councils are an important part of the democratic process. When they work, they work very well.

The councils that set out to fulfil their role and take it seriously are many and varied throughout the country. The late Professor Bryan Keith Lucas, emeritus professor of government at the University of Kent, said:

"It would be difficult to exaggerate the diversity of parishes and how their councils provide for them."

That comes from the foreword to the 1997 book "Parish Government 1894–1994", which he co-authored with K. P. Poole.

Lord Faversham, currently president of the NALC, has said that local democracy is a vital element in a healthy state and that parish, town and community councillors can make local councils a relevant, valuable and necessary part of the governance of this country in the 21st century.

We are all aware of the historical importance of parishes. When people say where they come from, they often refer to their parish rather than a large city or a town. Parishes go back way beyond the creation of parish councils. That historical link is good to see. Only in the Local Government Act 1894 were civil parishes formally created. That was reaffirmed in the Local Government Act 1972. Although both Acts were widely welcomed, they were also opposed by some in authority—the landed gentry and the Church in the first example and larger councils in the second, because they saw local councils as a threat. How things move on and sometimes come round.

There is a tremendous range of local councils—10,000 in England and Wales, as well as Scotland's community councils. They vary in size, with the larger ones, such as Bracknell, Dunstable and Oswestry, covering sizeable populations, while the smaller ones cover only 100 or 200 people. Their variety and diversity is their strength.

Local councils have about 50 powers and duties. There is tremendous variation in how they are exercised. Some exercise them widely, while others use them in only a limited way. It is important that however the powers are exercised, the councils are supported and regarded as important. Pleasingly, the powers of local councils were re-established in the Local Government and Rating Act 1997, when the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), gave them new powers over crime, transport and traffic control.

Local councils are an important part of the local government scene. It is easy to parody them as places where people just talk and little happens, but they can achieve a considerable amount and look after their population in many ways. Interestingly, it is the only part of local government in which it is not easy to control expenditure. I always whisper that very quietly as it could be considered to be a door that needs to be shut. I shall move on quickly as my hon. Friend the Minister is looking at me.

Local government—unitary authorities or two tiers of local government—often forgets that there is a third tier or, in the case of unitary authorities, a valuable second tier. Nowadays much emphasis is placed on joint working between the principal authority and local councils, but there is always room for improvement. If the move towards unitary authorities continues and gathers pace, rather than threatening parish and town councils, it may encourage them and further enhance their role. The process will be hastened if, as seems likely, we dispense with some of the councillors on the larger authorities and genuinely try to bring back local decision making and get councillors in touch with the populace.

Although the Government's approach to modernising local government is welcome, it is slightly disappointing that the White Paper "In Touch with the People" does not make much mention of local councils although it recognises that they are

"an essential part of the structure of local democracy in our country"

and

"will continue to play a key role in many of our towns and villages".

It recognises that they have

"a vital role in helping principal councils keep in touch with the smallest communities"

and making sure that they can work in partnership so that the best decisions are made.

Welcome as those words are, local councillors believe that their role could be further enhanced and their value given greater emphasis. I hope that the forthcoming urban and rural White Papers will stress the role of local councils.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one way to increase the perceived importance of town councils would be to give them a greater say in the planning process? Like me, the hon. Gentleman comes from Gloucestershire, so he will be aware that people's views, expressed through the town councils, are being overridden by unelected inspectors.

Mr. Drew: I shall not take up that challenge, but the hon. Gentleman knows my views on planning, as do many other hon. Members. I concur that there would probably be great benefit if local opinion, which is reflected in parish and town councils, were listened to more carefully, not just as part of the appeal process, but in advance of that process. Certainly when appeals are heard, it would nice for local councils to be given a proper role in the process.

I should like some answers from my hon. Friend about some specific issues, some of which are more important than others. My starting point is what I consider to be the Government's interest and concern for uprating and improving local government structure and the new ethical framework. Local councils support the Government's desire to provide an ethical framework for local government, based on codes of conduct, standards committees and so on. However, there is a belief that the concept is being passed down to them, rather than being created in the context of how local councils can best perform. That does not fully recognise the position of local councils in their own right. The alternative suggestion from the NALC is that local councils in each county area should prepare their own code of conduct in the light of national advice. The Government should be urged to rethink and clarify how that could be taken forward.

The second issue is best value. Again, local councils strongly support the approach of the Government in that regard. The policy intention is that the new regime will apply to all local authorities, including local councils, with budgeted expenditure above a defined threshold. The Government have indicated that that may be set at £500,000, subject to further consultation. Many local councils would allege that that is a low level, and it would be sensible for the Government to consider raising it. It is understood that the Government will consult with the NALC about the issue, and I look forward to hearing the result.

[Mr. Drew]

The third issue is community leadership, and again it is proposed that there be a new duty on all manner of local authorities to promote the social and economic well-being of communities. That will apply to the lowest level of local government. It would be sensible to recognise that that can be achieved by those councils in the lowest category, and again we would hope that the remit of such councils would be properly constituted and understood. I believe that it should be the right of every area, if it so wishes, to have a local council—whether that be a parish, a town or a community council.

It is pleasing that although every part of my area is now parished, other parts of Gloucestershire, which were traditionally not completely parished—such as the Cotswolds and the Forest of Dean—are now creating parish councils, which seem to be popular. I hope that the Government will welcome and encourage that, and not see it as a threat to other levels of local democracy.

My fourth point concerns the European charter of local self-government. There was concern, surprise and disappointment among councils that they were not included when the Government decided to ratify the charter. Councils, along with the principal authorities, had looked forward to the signing of the charter by the new Government and to its eventual ratification. They were taken aback when it was not applied to them, and the Government ought to think about the benefits of so doing.

I would link that with the local councils' welcome for the regionalisation of this country. They feel that they can play a part in helping that process. They would not want to have a formal role within regional development agencies, but some disappointment has been expressed at the fact that they have not always been included in the proposals or action plans for the evolution of the relevant chambers. That is not true in all areas and, in the south-west, there is a representation of local councillors through to the regional chamber. However, that is not always the case.

There are some real concerns about funding, as well as about the auditing and accounting regimes—certainly about the way in which local councils can borrow, which has been referred to as loan sanctioning. The restriction in total to £6.7 million a year is seen to be unduly restrictive. My largest town council, Stroud, has been seeking to borrow money, quite justifiably, for a particular project, but it is like waiting for Buggins's turn to get the money. That is neither fair nor reasonable, and I hope that the Minister will comment on whether it will be possible to increase the total amount and consider whether that could be shared out fairly.

The concern among parish and town councils about auditing and accounting is the principal reason for this Adjournment debate. They are concerned, first, about the imposition by regulation of a £5,000 a year spending threshold, above which all local council accounts are subjected to the full audit regime. Secondly, many councils are unhappy with the audit system itself because they consider it to be excessively prolonged, thus increasing fees. Complaints have also been raised at times about a lack of professionalism. Councils do not have the time to do what they want to do to meet the requirements of the Audit Commission.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McAvoy.]*

Mr. Drew: I undertook a survey and found that many councils were concerned about how the audit system was being applied. Many said that they wanted changes. By pure chance, I was sent some information a couple of days ago by Cotswold district council showing that Adlestrop had a precept of £181 a year and an audit fee of £168; one may well ask what happened to the other £13, but it is a question of precepting for a purpose.

Local councils have an important role to play. They are well respected in their communities. With proper training and support, the councillors and clerks can serve their populations well. I hope that my hon. Friend will consider ways in which we can further enhance the lower levels of local government and regard them not as an amusing aside but as an important part of our democratic structures.

7.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on his success in the ballot, and on raising the subject of the role of parish and town councils. It was apparent from what he said that he has great experience of the operation of local councils, especially in Gloucestershire. The role of town and parish councils is a matter of real concern at a time when everyone in local government is rightly considering the way in which their institutions operate and the role that local authorities, including parish councils, play in the democratic structure.

The enactment of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997, with full support from the current Government, reflects the valid role that parishes have to play. The implementation of that Act—the first parish-focused legislation in over 25 years, which the previous Government took through Parliament with our support—has enabled communities for the first time to petition for a parish in an unparished area and has returned the power to district councils to undertake reviews of their parish arrangements.

We have already agreed a number of new parishes and 20 will have been constituted by 1 April. I think that that provides a response to what my hon. Friend said and proves that we see a role for parishes in the democratic structure and that we are already encouraging the creation of more local councils.

When we were elected in May 1997 we pledged to modernise the country and bring government back to the people; and to create a new Britain for the new millennium—a decent society that serves all its people and not only the few. We are now implementing the most radical improvement to our constitution this century, with devolution for Scotland and Wales; a London Assembly with an elected mayor; and development agencies for the English regions.

Our better government initiative, along with the comprehensive spending review and our work on freedom of information, has examined how government can function more effectively and openly; but if we are to achieve change and deliver our pledges we need to mobilise all levels of government and society to work together. Local government at every level has a key role to play if people are to have the quality of life that they deserve. That must and should include parishes.

Local government is essential to our democracy but it is not as strong as it ought to be. One does not have to look far to see the weaknesses: low turnout at local elections—only 26 per cent. last May—and 2 million absentees from the electoral register. Too few people find local government interesting enough to bother to register or vote. We want to encourage the public to become more involved in local democracy and we hope that parishes will use their role as representatives of their communities to encourage local people to take part and have their say.

The White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People" put in place an ambitious programme of reform for the next 10 years or more. To implement that programme requires action by central Government and local government, local communities, business and the voluntary sector. I hope that parish councils will play their part. They have an important role to play in local decision making and provide a valuable opportunity for local people to take part in managing their environment. That is especially true in rural areas where parish councils are vital in representing, and servicing at the most local level, small and often tightly knit communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud referred to the rural White Paper. Thriving rural communities are an integral part of the Government's vision of a fair and decent society. Rural England is changing and we must respond to that change. We have therefore announced plans to produce the rural White Paper this year. It will look at the long-term future for the English countryside and at how a wide range of policies can support rural communities in the future. Work will proceed in tandem with the urban White Paper, recognising that town and country are inextricably linked. Consultation will be an important part of the process, so we will shortly issue a discussion document setting out key themes and inviting comments in advance of the publication of the White Papers. The National Association of Local Councils will of course be one of the consultees and is to help us in ensuring the consultation paper is seen by parish councils. I can assure my hon. Friend that any comments made by parishes will be carefully considered.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud made clear, there are wide variations between individual local councils, not least in size. While town and parish councils, and their representatives, play a vital representative role both locally and nationally, most parish councils have a limited role in terms of expenditure, functions and staff resources when compared with principal councils. Therefore, few of the changes we are considering for local authorities as a result of our local government White Paper will affect parish councils directly. Indeed, in many ways, because of their very local nature they are already close to their communities and, of course, as was mentioned, parish councils are unique in that every local government elector for such councils has the right to raise any matter affecting parish business at the annual parish meeting. In that respect, I agree that democracy is already more direct than in the case of other tiers of local government.

Minsters meet the National Association of Local Councils regularly. My hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing spoke at the NALC conference last year and met with NALC representatives most recently only last month where all the issues raised today were discussed in some detail. I shall therefore cover them only briefly now.

I note the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud on the new ethical framework, but the important thing to note is that local codes of conduct will be drawn up in consultation with local councils. As for best value, we are consulting various local government associations, including NALC, to consider the extent to which local councils should be subject to the best value regime. I am pleased to hear my hon. Friend's comments on the wish of local councils to play a positive role in the development of best value.

As I have already said, ministerial agreement to a number of new parishes confirms our view that they have a role in community leadership where a parish is wanted by local people. As for the cost of elections, it is a matter for local discretion as to whether a district council chooses to reclaim the cost of a parish by-election from the parish council. I understand that the Home Office has no plans at present to reconsider the existing legislation.

I do not intend to stray into the planning process, despite the temptation provided by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), but I note that the Rural Development Commission has provided assistance to parish councils through the production of a software package on village appraisals to aid them and others to understand their local community. That will help them to respond to the real challenges that arise from new planning proposals that affect their communities.

I am sorry that the reasons why parish councils are not subject to the European charter of local self-government are not fully understood. Rather than rehearse those arguments, I shall write to my hon. Friend to set out more fully the reasons why the Government reached that decision. As for regional chambers, we believe that it is right that it should be for the chamber itself to decide whether parish councils should be members.

As my hon. Friend is probably also aware, we are investigating the position on loan sanctions as the last two financial years have ended with a considerable balance of unused allocation. We need to be clear for future years about whether there is unmet demand. To that end it has been agreed that all borrowing approval applications will be submitted to my officials until the end of the financial year.

The new audit arrangements have been in place for only two years. They must be given time to settle down. We recognise that some parish clerks will have had difficulties adjusting to the new requirements, but audits should become clearer and simpler as parish clerks become more familiar with the new regulations. No doubt the Audit Commission will welcome NALC's views on the system in practice.

It has been said that the introduction of council tax benefit subsidy limitation would be a potential indirect cap on local council spending. That is not the case.

Although local precepting authorities are outside the scheme, in that they will not make contributions to benefit costs where the local authority sets a council tax above guideline, changes in the local precept may affect the amount by which it exceeds the guideline and, thus, the contribution to costs. The Government believe it right that that cost is met, in part or in full, by the local taxpayer rather than nationally. We expect local precepting authorities to behave responsibly and to take that into account.

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

We have received a number of representations from local authorities about the impact that parish council precepts may have on district budgets with regard to council tax benefit subsidy limitation. We will take them into account along with others before finalising the scheme.

I am disappointed to hear that there is a reluctance to use the 1972 Act section 137 funding, as that was not our understanding. A number of larger town councils have made use of it, and, of course, the facility is there for all parish councils to use. Certainly a recent study found that the current section 137 arrangements are generally regarded as satisfactory by the vast majority of parish councils, and it is encouraging to see that local councils are increasingly using their section 137 power, and that they are doing so for a wider range of activities.

Mr. Drew: There is some misunderstanding of exactly how section 137 operates. That is an example of where training and support, especially from principal councils, may be worth while, particularly for small parish councils or parish meetings.

Mr. Raynsford: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I shall write to him. I appreciate his concern for more information and training opportunities. The Government are not averse to helping to ensure that those who play a role in local councils are familiar with procedures and given help in understanding the available options.

I hope that my hon. Friend is assured that the Government see parish and town councils remaining an essential part of the structure of local democracy in our country. I hope the councils will continue to play a key role in many of our towns and villages. For our part, we will continue to consult parishes, through NALC and other local government associations, on the many issues raised by our radical agenda for modernisation.

I take this opportunity to refute accusations of not listening to parish council views. Ministers have listened to comments from NALC on a number of important recent issues and we meet them regularly to hear parish views.

Let me assure the House that the Government recognise that, although parish councils, as an integral part of the whole local government system, do not need a separate modernisation exercise from principal local authorities, they do have a vital role. We hope that they will help principal councils to keep in touch with the smallest communities in their areas, and that they will take on board many of the initiatives that we are progressing with the higher tiers of local government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at thirteen minutes past Seven o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 11 January 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups her Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62813]

Mr. Paul Murphy: This information has been placed in the Library.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in her Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63914]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information for the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Department is as follows:

(a) £447,837

(b) £2,883,221

(c) £966,887.

All figures exclude the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, and *(c)* also excludes the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland and the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, as information in the form requested is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Fair Employment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what targets she has set for reducing the unemployment differential between Catholics and Protestants; and by what criteria she will measure the impact of fair employment legislation. [64209]

Mr. Ingram: Government alone cannot reduce the unemployment differential. It also requires practical action and attitudinal change on the part of employers, educators and the unemployed themselves. To assess the rate of progress, the Government propose to commission the Equality Commission to agree with the representatives of employers, employees, political parties and other interests, benchmark measures for the future reduction of the unemployment differential, informed by up-to-date professional analysis. Moreover, the Equality Commission will be given a role in advising the Government on measures which they might introduce to reduce the number of, or religious imbalance in, the unemployed.

The impact of the legislation will continue to be measured by changes in the composition of the workforce and by the comparison of the Community composition of those appointed to jobs with that of those applying.

Security

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the measures taken in each month since February to reduce security activity. [64205]

Mr. Ingram: Since the reinstatement of the Provisional IRA ceasefire in July 1997, the Chief Constable has announced a progressive reduction in security measures in the Province. Each step has been fully consistent with the level of threat and taken after a review of the security situation.

From February to the end of August, key factors which influenced the levels of security across the Province included the "tit for tat" killings following the murder of Billy Wright in 27 December 1997, devices in 5 town centres, attacks of security forces and the marching season.

However, from September, the following measures have been taken:

Base Reductions

October

Vacation of Letterkenny, Muff and Hemp vehicle checkpoints

Demolition of Crumlin Road Sangar

Demolition of R16 Road Sangar

Announcement of closure of Fort Whiterock

November

Demolition of three PVCPs at Bessbrook

Work started to demolish Muff vehicle checkpoint (Ongoing)

Work started to demolish Letterkenny and Aughnacloy vehicle checkpoints (Ongoing)

Work started to demolish Hump vehicle checkpoint (Ongoing)

January 1999

Work started to demolish Fort Whiterock Army Base (Ongoing)

Troop Movements

September

The last remaining company of the Rural Reinforcement Battalion (RRB) returned to the Mainland

October

The last remaining company of the Urban Reinforcement Battalion (URB) returned to the Mainland

November

Drumadd Roulement Battalion (DRB) returned to the Mainland

Military Patrol Support to RUC

September

Military patrols ceased in Belfast Region

Military patrols ceased in South Derry

October

Military patrols ceased in Waterside and City side, Londonderry

Military patrols ceased in RUC G Division

November

Military patrols ceased in the Strabane Sub Division.

Robberies

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was for each police division in Northern Ireland for *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998 up to the latest available date the number of incidents of robbery and attempted robbery from the dwellings of persons of pension age and above where violence was used or threatened, the number of persons who have been made amenable in the courts, the number of cases pending, the sums stolen and the value of goods stolen and the number of persons injured by the robbers. [64763]

Mr. Ingram: Statistical data are not maintained in a manner to indicate, readily, the number of prosecutions pending for such offences or how many persons have been made amenable through the courts. The following tables record the available statistics including information in relation to robberies and attempted robberies which have been cleared up by the police. The figures for 1998 require end-year verification and are therefore quoted on a provisional basis. For statistical purposes, a case is said to be cleared if a person has been charged, summonsed, or cautioned for the offence; if the offence is taken into consideration by a court; if there is sufficient evidence to charge a person but it is not proceeded with because, for example, the suspect is under the age of criminal responsibility; or if the suspect has died.

The number of robberies in dwellings, recorded and cleared, by Division 1996, 1997 and 1998 to end November (where victim was aged 65 and over)

	Armed robbery		*Attempted armed robbery*		*Robbery*		*Attempted robbery*	
	Recorded	*Cleared*	*Recorded*	*Cleared*	*Recorded*	*Cleared*	*Recorded*	*Cleared*
1996								
A	1	0	0	0	4	1	1	1
B	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
D	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	0
E	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
G	1	1	0	0	7	0	0	0
H	0	0	0	0	7	0	2	0
J	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
K	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
L	2	0	1	0	3	0	1	0
N	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
O	0	0	1	0	4	0	0	0
P	1	0	0	0	4	1	0	0
Total	13	2	3	0	38	3	6	1
1997								
A	0	0	0	0	5	0	1	1
B	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
D	4	0	0	0	5	2	0	0
E	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
G	0	0	0	0	5	0	3	0
H	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
J	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
K	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0
L	3	1	0	0	4	0	0	0
N	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0
O	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
P	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0
Total	9	1	0	0	33	5	5	1
1998								
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
D	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
E	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
G	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
H	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
J	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
K	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
L	0	0	1	0	4	0	0	0
N	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
O	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
P	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total	3	0	1	0	18	0	1	0

The value of goods stolen (£), by Division, 1996, 1997 and 1998 to end November in respect of incidents recorded above

	1996	1997	1998
A	1,530	7,430	—
B	226	1,565	220
D	4,377	21,394	5,350
E	120	1,150	—
G	2,910	5,420	—
H	2,856	—	2,201
J	32,130	23	1,220
K	12,300	6,040	1,055
L	10,280	10,340	730
N	40	1,025	—
O	2,860	470	8,850
P	1,957	1,250	3,100
Total	71,586	56,107	22,726

Note:
Where the value appears to be particularly high the amount may include the value of a car stolen during the same incident.

Injuries sustained during robberies, by Division, 1996, 1997 and 1998 to end November in respect of incidents recorded above

	1996			1997			1998		
	Serious	Minor	None	Serious	Minor	None	Serious	Minor	None
A	1	0	5	1	1	4	0	0	0
B	0	1	2	0	1	3	0	0	1
D	0	3	3	0	5	4	0	2	0
E	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
G	0	2	6	1	2	5	0	1	0
H	0	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	3
J	1	1	2	0	1	0	1	1	2
K	0	1	2	0	2	0	0	2	1
L	0	1	6	0	2	5	0	1	4
N	0	1	2	1	1	1	0	0	0
O	0	1	4	0	1	1	0	1	2
P	1	2	2	0	1	3	0	1	0
Total	4	17	39	3	20	26	1	9	13

Departmental Costs

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of *(a)* the cost of setting up a new department of Government in Northern Ireland and *(b)* the annual running costs of each such department. [64765]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Work on the costings of those new departmental structures in Northern Ireland which were agreed between the First Minister Designate and Deputy First Minister Designate of the new Northern Ireland Assembly on 18 December is proceeding but detailed estimates are not yet available.

Pigmeat Imports

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the cost of the pigmeat imported from outside the United Kingdom for consumption in schools, hospitals and prisons administered by her Department in each of the last three years. [65119]

Mr. McFall: None of the pigmeat consumed in Northern Ireland schools, hospitals and prisons over the last 3 years has been imported from outside the United Kingdom.

Specified Organisations

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions *(a)* the opinion of a senior police officer has been given in court as evidence of a person's membership of a specified organisation, *(b)* a court has been asked to draw an inference from the failure of a person suspected of belonging to a specified organisation to mention a relevant fact; how many persons have been (i) charged and (ii) convicted of belonging to a specified organisation since September and on how many occasions a court has ordered forfeiture of property following conviction for belonging to a specified organisation. [64206]

The Attorney-General: I have been asked to reply.

To date there have been no proceedings under section 30 of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996 in relation to specified organisations as defined by the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 and so the answer to each of the questions is none.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the official visits which Ministers in his Department have paid to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997. [64132]

Mr. Hoon: Since 2 May 1997, there has been one official visit made by a Minister from this Department to Buckinghamshire. The Lord Chancellor attended the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference in Chesham on 16 June 1998. Whilst I have made no official visits, I know the local area well.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63873]

Mr. Hoon: The over-riding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures is that they should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage. Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin, and not nationality. The nine ethnic minority categories monitored by the Lord Chancellor's Department are based on those used in the 1991 census which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes in the 2001 Population Census.

Legal Aid

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what the failure rate is in legally aided personal injury cases; and what was the cost to the Legal Aid Fund of such cases in each of the past five years. [63942]

Mr. Hoon: It is not possible to provide the information in the form requested. In cases that settle out of court, the terms of the settlement are not recorded on the Legal Aid Board's computer system, and it is therefore not possible to determine whether, in these cases, the plaintiff's claim was met in full. Information is available only in respect of cases where no damages were awarded. The proportion of cases receiving no damages in each of the last five years, was as follows:

Year	*Proportion of cases without damages (Percentage)*	*Net cost of cases without damages (£)*
1996–97	42	60,823,987
1995–96	43	54,642,081
1994–95	37	44,102,253
1993–94	38	37,482,163
1992–93	35	22,079,048

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how long the Legal Aid Board takes to process non-urgent applications. [64676]

Mr. Hoon: In 1997–98, the Legal Aid Board processed 84 per cent. of civil legal aid applications within 2 weeks, and 94 per cent. within 4 weeks.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if solicitors receive acknowledgment letters in response to legal aid applications, and are kept informed of progress in consideration of the applications. [64677]

Mr. Hoon: The Legal Aid Board does not acknowledge receipt of civil legal aid applications received, nor does it keep solicitors informed of the progress of the application. On average, the Board receives 450,000 applications for civil legal aid a year. In the majority of cases, a decision is made within one to four weeks. As the majority of applications are decided within a short period, sending acknowledgment letters would create additional costs and an unnecessary administrative burden.

On request, the Board is able to inform the solicitor of the current status of any particular matter.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the Corporate Information System of the Legal Aid Board. [64675]

Mr. Hoon: The Legal Aid Board's Corporate Information System (CIS) was implemented on a phased basis which began with the first office going live in November 1997 and the final office in November 1998. The system is now fully operational in all Board offices. CIS is a fully integrated case management system for all types of legal aid with a single database. It replaces systems which were supported by increasingly ancient software and hardware which were not Millennium compliant. CIS provides the Board with more effective control over the management of the Legal Aid Fund and is an essential part of the Board's strategy for preparing for contracting with suppliers of legal services.

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average level of debt write-off in *(a)* the Reading legal aid region and *(b)* nationally in the last year for which figures are available. [65100]

Mr. Hoon: It is the Board's policy to pursue recovery of all debts unless it is evident it would not be cost effective to do so. The average value of debt written off nationally and in the Reading legal aid region in 1997–98, which are the latest figures available, are as follows:

	£
Reading	637
Nationally	700

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average amount of legal aid granted for claims in *(a)* the Reading region and *(b)* nationally in the last year for which figures are available. [65099]

Mr. Hoon: In 1997–98, the average gross cost of legal aid claims paid in respect of civil and criminal legal aid and advice and assistance (green form) in *(a)* Reading and *(b)* nationally were:

	Reading legal aid region		*National*	
	Total number	*(£) average*	*Total number*	*(£) average*
Civil legal aid	20,142	3,420	328,845	3,018
Criminal legal aid	35,311	470	494,130	496
Advice and assistance (Green Form)	84,611	91	1,586,764	106

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what protocols have been established *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the Reading legal aid region on the length of time for which printouts showing the levels of client contribution should be kept. [65102]

Mr. Hoon: Since the introduction of the Legal Aid Board's Corporate Information System (CIS) records of all contribution payments received from assisted persons, for both live and closed cases are maintained on the database. The Board's current policy is to maintain these records indefinitely and information can be printed out at any time.

The Board's Reading area office moved onto CIS in April 1998. The above procedure applied from that date. Prior to the introduction of CIS, full records of contributions received for all live cases were maintained on a computer system (OLIFS). At the end of a case, the system would produce a Closing Financial Statement which is retained for six years from the date the case was closed.

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the annual cost of the Legal Aid Service in the Reading legal aid region. [65241]

Mr. Hoon: In 1997–98, the gross cost of legal aid services paid for out of the Reading Legal Aid Area Office was £105 million. The figure includes payments on account, final bill payments, VAT and disbursements, where applicable. It excludes the amounts that the Board received in contributions, costs paid by other parties and damages, all of which are sent direct to the Legal Aid Board's Financial Services at its Headquarters in London. The amount of gross costs paid to the legal profession nationally in 1997–98 was £1,612 million.

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what systems are in place *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the Reading legal aid region to ensure that client overpayments of contribution are returned. [65103]

Mr. Hoon: Legal Aid contributions are paid by the assisted person by monthly instalments to the Legal Aid Board. Contributions are paid throughout the life of a case. Payments are normally sent direct to the Board's Financial Services at its Headquarters in London. All payments received are recorded centrally on the computer system. In the absence of information to the contrary, any excess contribution instalments received by the Legal Aid Board are treated as payments in advance of future instalments due. Repayments are not, therefore, made to the assisted person until the conclusion of a case unless specifically requested. Any overpayments made to the Legal Aid Board would be identified and accounted for at the end of the case.

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many people are employed by the Legal Aid Service *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the Reading legal aid region. [65248]

Mr. Hoon: The Legal Aid Board has 13 area offices and two offices in London housing its central function departments. The average number of permanent staff employed by the Board from April to November 1998 is 931 nationally, with 70 at the Reading area office.

In addition, the Legal Aid Board employs temporary staff on either a contract basis or for a specified period and who are included on the Board's payroll. The average number of temporary staff employed for the same period is 237 nationally and 6 at the Reading area office.

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what sums are spent on training in the Legal Aid Service *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the Reading legal aid region. [65249]

Mr. Hoon: The Legal Aid Board provides a national training programme which ranges from the development of legal reference and training materials for caseworkers and quality auditors to senior management development programmes. During 1998–99, expenditure on the national training programme is expected to be £276,014.

In addition, £158,000 is allocated to 23 area and central function offices to provide local training initiatives which fall outside the national training programme. In-house on-the-job training is also provided in each office, after which performance is assessed by staff trained as trainers to identify any further staff development needs. Expenditure on local training initiatives undertaken within the legal aid area office in Reading is expected to be £5,000 by the end of the 1998–99 financial year.

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average level of non-collection of client contribution towards legal aid payment in *(a)* the Reading region and *(b)* nationally in the last year for which figures are available. [65101]

Mr. Hoon: It is the Board's policy to pursue recovery of contributions in all cases unless it is evident that it would not be cost effective to do so. The average value of contributions written off during 1997–98, which are the latest figures available are:

	£
Reading	287
Nationally	245

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what arrangements have been made to monitor franchised legal aid firms *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the Reading legal aid region. [65104]

Mr. Hoon: The Legal Aid Board's arrangements for monitoring legal aid franchises apply nationally. Over a period of up to nine months, applicants for a legal aid franchise are subjected to two audits by the Board. A preliminary audit is carried out to ensure the applicants have developed appropriate procedures to meet the requirements set out in the Franchising Specification and to assess the effectiveness of implementation. If successful, a pre-contract audit will then be undertaken. The pre-contract audit will cover, in more detail, the requirements of the Franchising Specification, including the general and management requirements and transaction criteria, which are the Board's measure of the quality service process. Once a firm of solicitors has been awarded a legal aid franchise, the Board's liaison managers and franchise quality auditors will undertake regular audits of the firm's case files approximately every twelve months.

DEFENCE

CR Gas

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons CR gas was selected from the available riot control gases to be stockpiled for the counter-terrorist response capability. [63844]

Mr. Spellar: CR gas was selected some decades ago as a potential counter-terrorist response capability and there are no surviving records of this decision. However,

stocks of CR gas continue to be held as tests have confirmed it to be effective as a potential counter-terrorist response capability.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much CR tear gas has been manufactured by his Department since 1968; and at which establishment it was manufactured. [63843]

Mr. Spellar: The riot control agent CR was only ever manufactured by the MOD at the Chemical Defence Establishment at Nancekuke, Cornwall, between 1962 and 1977. On the closure of Nancekuke and the subsequent return of the site to the RAF, the remaining stocks of CR were transferred to the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency at Porton Down.

It is not possible to determine from the remaining records exactly how much CR was manufactured after 1968.

Territorial Army

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the recruitment totals from 1990 to the present for each TA centre in Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Somerset. [64464]

Mr. Spellar: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Defence Contracts (Oil)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the countries with which there are Government to Government Defence contracts paid for in oil in the last five years; and when the memoranda of understanding with those countries were signed; [64636]

(2) if there are guide prices for oil established within the memoranda of understanding with states purchasing defence equipment from the United Kingdom with oil risings; and what measures are in place to protect defence contractors and public funds from variations in oil prices. [64640]

Mr. Spellar: There have been no Government to Government Defence contracts paid for in the last five years, which involve Her Majesty's Government taking oil as payment.

Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre for 1998–99. [65079]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The role of the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre is to produce imagery intelligence and imagery products and services to meet MOD and operational command requirements. The Key Targets for the Agency for the 12 months from April 1998 are as set out.

Key Target 1:

To provide operational intelligence support as follows:

98 per cent. of Priority 1 tasks to be completed within 24 hours of the receipt of appropriate imagery.

92 per cent. of Priority 2 tasks to be completed within 48 hours of the receipt of appropriate imagery.

88 per cent. of Priority 3 tasks to be completed within 7 days of the receipt of appropriate imagery.

Key Target 2:

To provide detached Service personnel as required up to a total of 22 at any one time.

Key Target 3:

To complete Strategic, non-operational, intelligence requirements and other tasks as follows:

92 per cent. of Priority 1 tasks to be completed within 24 hours of the receipt of appropriate imagery.

88 per cent. of Priority 2 tasks to be completed within 48 hours of the receipt of appropriate imagery.

80 per cent. of Priority 3 tasks to be completed within 7 days of the receipt of appropriate imagery.

75 per cent. of Priority 4 tasks to be completed within 6 weeks of the receipt of appropriate imagery.

Key Target 4:

To revise the methodology of measuring the degree of customer satisfaction with the service provided.

Key Target 5:

To achieve a 2.5 per cent. improvement in efficiency.

Key Target 6:

To conduct evaluation of reconnaissance systems for MOD and other Governments within agreed times and allocated resources.

Defence Animal Centre

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Animal Centre for 1998–99. [64742]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief Executive of the Defence Animal Centre has been set the following Key Targets for 1998–1999.

1. Meet 100 per cent. of the requirements for trained military personnel and trained military working animals for operations.
2. To achieve a customer satisfaction rating of at least 95 per cent. for the quality of its trained output.
3. To achieve a customer satisfaction rating of at least 95 per cent. of the quantity of its trained output.
4. To achieve a customer satisfaction rating of at least 95 per cent. for the timeliness of delivery.
5. Meet course specific training success rates for Military Working Animals of at least 95 per cent.
6. Meet training success rates for personnel of at least 90 per cent.

Trident

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on changes to the Strategic Defence Review decision to cancel the final tranche of Trident nuclear missiles; and what value of Trident missile components have been purchased from the USA since the Strategic Defence Review. [65042]

Mr. George Robertson: There has been no change to the Strategic Defence Review decision to cancel the planned final batch of Trident D5 missiles. Since the SDR, we have authorised $100.6m for US fiscal year 99 procurement of Trident missile components as announced in my written answer of 30 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *453*. Some of these relate to the completion of earlier missile orders; of the remainder, some will be required as in service spares and the balance will be sold back to the US in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding that I announced on 30 July 1998, *Official*

Report, column *453*. Overall, our decision to maintain our Trident missile inventory at 58 is expected to save in the region of £50 million.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy to store the warhead component separately from the missile delivery vehicles of the Trident nuclear system. [65044]

Mr. George Robertson: We concluded in the SDR that storing Trident warheads separately from the missiles would be incompatible in current circumstances with maintaining a credible minimum deterrent with a submarine-based nuclear system.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the provision of spare and replacement parts for the Trident nuclear missile system, indicating in how many cases there is a single supplier of spare or replacement parts. [65041]

Mr. George Robertson: The Trident missile system was procured off the shelf from the United States under the provisions of the Polaris Sales Agreement of 1963, as amended for Trident. Missile system components, including spares and replacement parts, are procured on our behalf by the US Department of Defence (DoD). For most elements of the system, the DoD uses Prime Contractors (for example, for the missile itself the prime contractor is Lockheed Martin Missile Systems) who in turn employ numerous sub-contractors. Because of the nature of the procurement, we do not have detailed visibility of the sub-contractor network, but I can say that for most major components single suppliers are employed because of the high costs of supplier qualification and the low levels of production now remaining.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy to rule out a first-strike use of the UK's Trident missiles. [65045]

Mr. George Robertson: In conducting the Strategic Defence Review, we concluded that such a policy of No First Use of Nuclear weapons would be incompatible with our and NATO's doctrine of deterrence, and that it would not further nuclear disarmament.

Correspondence

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon will receive a substantive reply to his question to which a holding answer was given on 2 December. [64733]

Mr. Spellar: I replied to the hon. Member on 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *520*.

UN Volunteer Force

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what forces Her Majesty's Government have on stand-by for United Nations duty; how rapidly they can be deployed in an emergency; and what consideration he has given to improving their *(a)* training and *(b)* readiness; [64956]

(2) if he will make it his policy to support the creation of a permanent UN Volunteer Force. [64957]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Government do not support the concept of a permanent United Nations Volunteer Force because it would involve duplicating expensive capabilities that already exist among member states, and because it would be impractical to create a single force that could cater for every eventuality. We believe the most effective way to provide the UN with military support is through the Secretary-General's Standby Arrangements initiative. Since 1994, the United Kingdom has declared a range of forces to be potentially available under the United Nations' Standby Forces Planning Arrangement to facilitate the rapid deployment of forces once political decisions on their use have been made. Following last year's Strategic Defence Review, we have decided to strengthen our commitment by declaring the whole range of our rapidly deployable forces as potentially available to the United Nations. This will be formalised in a Memorandum of Understanding which we plan to have ready for signature by March this year.

The forces declared in the Memorandum of Understanding will be drawn from the new Joint Rapid Reaction Forces, which will have an initial operational capability available by 1 April 1999 and be fully operational by 2001. Each of the elements of this force will be held at graduated states of readiness, ranging from 24 hours up to and including 30 days.

We believe the training and readiness of the United Kingdom's Armed Forces to be the equal of the best in the world. Nevertheless, we remain committed to seeking improvements to these high standards. That is why we announced, also as part of the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, that the Chief of Joint Operations will have increased authority for enhancing the training and preparedness of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces.

Tony Geraghty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons the computer files and research material of the author Tony Geraghty have been seized by Ministry of Defence Police. [65368]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This is a matter for the Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency. I have asked the Chief Constable to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from W. E. E. Boreham to Mr. Austin Mitchell, dated 11 January 1999:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about property seized by the Ministry of Defence Police from Tony Geraghty, as this falls into my area of responsibility as Chief Constable/Chief Executive of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency.

Computer files and research material were seized, under warrant, from the home address of Mr. Geraghty, as part of an investigation in connection with alleged offences against the Official Secrets Acts. The property seized is currently under evaluation.

Armed Forces (Youth Recruitment)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list by age the numbers of men and women aged under 18 years in the armed forces. [65004]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The number of men and women aged under 18 years in the armed forces is as follows:

	Male	*Female*	*Total*
Naval Service			
16 year olds	268	49	317
17 year olds	693	128	821
Total	961	177	1,138
Army			
16 year olds	1,083	99	1,182
17 year olds	3,449	428	3,877
Total	4,532	527	5,059
Royal Air Force			
16 year olds	37	12	49
17 year olds	364	66	430
Total	401	78	479

AWE Committee

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the Local Liaison Committee of the Atomic Weapons Establishment Committee *(a)* has met since 1 January 1997 and *(b)* plans to meet in 1999; and if the minutes of this committee are publicly available. [65056]

Mr. Spellar: The Atomic Weapons Establishment has two Local Liaison Committees, one covering the sites at Aldermaston and Burghfield, the other covering the site at Cardiff which is being decommissioned.

The Local Liaison Committee for the Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston and Burghfield met on the following dates:

20 February 1997

19 June 1997

2 October 1997

12 February 1998

21 May 1998

4 June 1998

15 October 1998.

The Local Liaison Committee for AWE Cardiff met on the following dates:

19 June 1997

28 November 1997

26 June 1998

23 November 1998.

The next meeting of the AWE Aldermaston and Burghfield LLC is scheduled for 11 February 1999. It is expected that there will also be meetings in June and October 1999. The next meeting of the Cardiff LLC is scheduled for 17 May 1999 and it is expected that another one will be arranged for November.

The minutes of the two committees are circulated to all members in order that they can disseminate the information or place it on local council files as appropriate.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Wells: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) for how many flight hours during 1997–98 Government Ministers have used the aircraft of 32 (The Royal) Squadron based at Northolt Airport; which Government officers used it the most; how much per hour the RAF charges ministers; and how much of this figure relates to Northolt Airport costs; [63696]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of the Government chartering business jets when RAF jet aircraft of 32 (The Royal) Squadron Aircraft were unavailable in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will list the number of charters hired for that purpose; and the Ministers involved. [63695]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the replies I gave to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *711*.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the term "average cost", with reference to flights taken by Ministers in his Department, refers to the average cost per passenger. [64726]

Mr. Spellar: The average cost refers to the average cost per trip and not the average cost per passenger.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will place in the Library a copy of a table listing ministerial flights on RAF aircraft. [64725]

Mr. Spellar: A copy of the table was placed in the Library of the House on 19 November.

Turkey

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he and his NATO counterparts have taken to seek to ensure that civilian control over the military is maintained and enhanced in Turkey; and if he will make a statement. [62098]

Mr. Spellar: The European Commission has made clear, in its recent report on Turkey's progress towards EU accession, that the strengthening of democratic institutions and civilian control of the military are vital components in bringing Turkey closer to its aspirations for full membership. We will continue to work with Turkey on this issue.

Harassment Policy (DERA)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the harassment policy within DERA is applicable to other MOD employees; and if he will make a statement. [65031]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

RAF Leeming

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions in the last year RAF Leeming has put up a tour of their base as a prize in a charity auction; and for each occasion which charity or organisation was involved. [64760]

Mr. Spellar: A tour of the base has been offered on sixteen separate occasions since 1 January 1998. The organisations involved are as follows:

Easingwold Hospice
Richmond School
Shepway CAB
Brompon on Swale Primary School
Linton on Ouse playing field project
Yorkshire Cancer Research
Friarage Hospital Breast Care Unit
RAF Leeming Child Care Charities
NSPCC (Yorkshire)
Bedale County Primary School
Dr. Barnados (Darlington)
Ripon Grammar School
Thornton Watlass Primary School
RELATE (Scarborough/Bridlington)
Highcliffe Primary School
Allertonshire School.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost was in staff time of the tour organised at RAF Leeming in January as a prize in a fund-raising auction for the British Field Sports Society. [64826]

Mr. Spellar: There were no extra costs associated with this tour. It was a standard station tour, organised and conducted in the normal way by the station Community Relations Officer, and lasted approximately 7 hours. The value of the staff time of the Community Relations Officer and all other personnel that the locally based visitors met will have amounted to less than £100.

RAF Alconbury

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect costs to public funds were incurred as a result of the Sportsman's Bash held in February hosted by RAF Alconbury. [64829]

Mr. Spellar: No direct or indirect costs were incurred by public funds.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions in the last year RAF Alconbury has hosted events for charities or other organisations; and if he will list the organisations concerned. [64762]

Mr. Spellar: Five outside functions have been hosted at RAF Alconbury in the last year, all of which have been at no cost to UK public funds. They were:

20 February 1998—Sportsman's Bash
21 February 1998—Huntingdon Cromwell Rotary Club—International Evening
21 March 1998—Friends of the 8th Air Force Dinner
20 June 1998—Friends of the 8th Air Force Dinner
13 November 1998—Cambridgeshire Constabulary Senior Officers Dining Club Function.

Otterburn Ranges

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate *(a)* the cost and *(b)* planned training days lost resulting from the re-opening of the public inquiry into his proposals for investment in improvements to the Otterburn ranges in Northumberland; and if he will make a statement. [65048]

Mr. Spellar: It was originally estimated that training on the new developments at Otterburn would commence in 2001. When training could now start depends on the length of the re-opened Public Inquiry. Until we know the length of the Inquiry, it is not possible to give an accurate estimate of the effect on training nor of any associated costs.

Troop Deployment

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he plans to take in respect of UK troop deployment following the announcement of the Under-Secretary General of Peacekeeping at the United Nations that under 18 year-olds will not be included on UN peacekeeping missions. [65010]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We fully accept the UN's undertaking that personnel under the age of 18 will not be included on UN peacekeeping missions. When my Department responds to a UN request for the deployment of UK troops to a peacekeeping operation, the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) allocates tasks to the three Services as appropriate. UN requirements are of course complied with, including age restrictions. However, there may be occasions when Royal Navy units already deployed overseas, are called at short notice to such an operation. These units may contain small numbers of under 18 year-olds.

Atomic Weapons Establishment (Technical Papers)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many reports in the two series of reports produced by the Mathematical Physics Division of the Atomic Weapons Establishment are currently unclassified. [65058]

Mr. Spellar: A total of 130 reports in the two series produced by the Mathematical Physics Division of the Atomic Weapons Establishment are currently unclassified.

Pigmeat Consumption

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of the pigmeat imported from outside the United Kingdom which was purchased for consumption by British service men and women in each of the last three years. [65121]

Mr. Spellar: The procurement of food for the Armed Forces is contracted to Booker Foodservice who were selected and took over the contract on 1 October 1997. In the first year of the contract Booker Foodservice imported some £1.45 million worth of pigmeat, representing 50 per cent. of the Armed Forces' requirement for bacon and gammon. The balance of the requirement for bacon and gammon and all of the requirement for pork were obtained from UK sources at a cost of £4.25 million. Unfortunately, the cost of imported pigmeat for the previous two years, when NAAFI held the contract, is not available. We believe, however, that the proportion of imported pigmeat will have been broadly similar to that advised by Booker Foodservice.

Cruise Missiles (Iraq)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if British cruise missiles have been used in the attack on Iraq. [65160]

Mr. George Robertson: No British cruise missiles were used during Operation Desert Fox, the 16–19 December air campaign against Iraq.

Nuclear Weapons (Gulf)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will rule out the use of nuclear weapons by UK forces in the Gulf. [65043]

Mr. George Robertson: The United Kingdom would consider the use of nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence.

TREASURY

VAT (Government Departments)

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes he proposes to make to the way in which Government departments account for VAT on contracted-out services. [65410]

Mr. Milburn: The 1984 Finance Act provided for Customs and Excise to make refunds to departments in respect of the VAT they pay on contracted out services. This was designed to remove a potential disincentive to contracting out services to the private sector, where this represented value for money for the taxpayer. Since 1996–97 these VAT refunds have been netted off against expenditure in departments' Estimates and Appropriation Accounts. The Government have reconsidered this approach and concluded that it is not consistent with the legislation governing the treatment of receipts, which requires most receipts of Government departments to be appropriated in aid or surrendered to the Consolidated Fund. We will therefore revert to the arrangements that applied prior to 1996–97. So long as cash based Estimates and Appropriation Accounts continue to exist refunds of VAT on contracted out services will be appropriated in aid, an approach which provides a greater degree of transparency.

Convergence Programme

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to produce a Convergence Programme. [65411]

Mr. Gordon Brown: A Convergence Programme was submitted on 23 December 1998 to the European Commission. Copies of the Convergence Programme were placed in the Libraries of both Houses on that day.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he has produced written guidance for the creation of new public private partnership capital schemes; and when he expects to produce final written guidance for potential project sponsors. [64678]

Mr. Milburn: Partnerships for Prosperity was published in November 1997. There is also a programme of guidance and technical notes for those engaged in the PFI in the public sector. Last year's publications were:

General

Private Finance and IT: A Practical Guide

A Step-by-Step Guide to the PFI Procurement Process

Policy Statements and Technical Notes

Policy Statement No.2: Public Sector Comparators and Value for Money

Policy Statement No.3: PFI and Public Expenditure Allocations for Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Policy Statement No.4: Disclosure of Information and Consultation with Staff and other Interested Parties

Technical Note No.2: How to follow EC Procurement Procedure and Advertise in the OJEC

Technical Note No.3: How to Appoint and Manage Advisers.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if agreement has been reached with the Accounting Standards Board on the accounting presentation of PFI schemes in Government; and if he will make a statement. [64679]

Mr. Milburn: The Government welcomed the publication by the Accounting Standards Board on 10 September of Application Note F—Private Finance Initiative and similar contracts to Financial Reporting Standard 5. Officials are preparing detailed guidance reflecting this document to replace the Treasury's current guidance on this subject.

Pre-Budget Report

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the changed assumption and calculation methods used in Table B9 of the Pre-Budget report (Cm 4076), compared with Table 4.5 in the July 1997 Red Book, HC 85. [64637]

Mr. Milburn: The conventions used in the July 1997 Red Book are set out in Annex B of Chapter 4. Those used in the Pre-Budget Report are described on pages 123–27 of that document.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Ron Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what were the percentage increases in *(a)* the total expenditure of Department of Trade and Industry, Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Education and Employment in 1999–2000 and in the Welsh block for the same year, *(b)* each Department's expenditure relevant to the purposes of calculating the formula consequences for the Welsh block and *(c)* the expenditure within the Welsh block comparable to (b) above; [63613]

(2) what changes he has made in the method of calculating the formula consequences for the Welsh block of expenditure by the DTI, DFEE, DETR and DCMS; [63550]

(3) what comparability factor he used in calculating the formula consequences for the Welsh block of expenditure by the DTI, DETR, DCMS and DFEE in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [63549]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* No changes have been made to the method of operating the Barnett formula. The Government have already set out a statement of principles to govern changes to the devolved administrations' budgets in a reply by the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury to my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) on 9 December 1997, *Official Report,* columns *510–13.*

The Government maintained the 1997–98 and 1998–99 allocations to the Welsh Office determined by the previous Government in the 1996 Public Expenditure Survey.

The percentage increases in the total Departmental Expenditure Limits can be derived from the tables in "Modern Public Services for Britain: Investing in Reform" (Cm 4011).

Changes in the total departmental programme expenditure provide the basis for calculating formula consequentials for the Welsh Office budget. Each Departmental Expenditure Limit has a specific comparability determined by the coverage of Welsh Office services. In the Comprehensive Spending Review these are, for the Welsh Office:

	Percentage
DTI	27.0
DETR—non-local government	70.0
DETR—local government	100.0
DCMS	87.3
DfEE	75.8

As the Secretary of State for Wales, and in turn the National Assembly for Wales, are free to allocate expenditure within the Welsh block as they see fit, the structure of programmes within the Welsh block does not exactly mirror the departmental structure in England. It is therefore not possible to calculate the percentage increases in expenditure within the Welsh budget which are comparable to each Department's expenditure.

British Workers (EU)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many British people moved to other parts of the EU in the last year for which figures are available; how many of them were of working age; and how many moved from the West Midlands. [64479]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 17 December 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking about estimates of British people moving to other parts of the EU.

It is estimated that 52.2 thousand British citizens migrated from the United Kingdom to other EU countries in 1996. Of these, 34.1 thousand were of working age. A total of 5.6 thousand persons migrated from the West Midlands to the EU. Due to sample size it is not appropriate to disaggregate the estimate further to identify British citizens.

A migrant from the United Kingdom is defined as a person who has resided in the UK for a year or more, and who states on departure the intention to reside abroad for a year or more.

Estimates of migrants are derived from the International Passenger Survey (IPS), a continuous voluntary survey which covers the principal air and sea routes between the United Kingdom (UK) and countries outside the British Isles. The routes between the UK and the Irish Republic are excluded, as is all movement of diplomats and armed forces personnel. Estimates derived from the IPS are subject to both sampling and non-sampling errors. As an approximate guide, the standard error for an estimate of five thousand migrants is around 35 per cent., whilst for an estimate of 40 thousand migrants this is reduced to around 10 per cent.

Smoking (Death Certificates)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the number of death certificates each year that refer to smoking as a cause of death. [64100]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Peter Bottomley, dated 17 December 1997:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the estimated number of death certificates each year that refer to smoking as a cause of death.

The table below gives the number of death certificates in each of the last five years that referred to smoking as an underlying or contributory cause of death.

Number of deaths where smoking was mentioned on the death certificate as a cause of death, 1993–97, England and Wales

Year	*Number of deaths*
1993	2,038
1994	1,313
1995	1,080
1996	744
1997	686

Smoking is only recorded as a cause of death on the death certificate for a small proportion of the deaths which are likely to be caused by smoking. According to the latest figures calculated by the Health Education Authority, there were an estimated 121,000 deaths due to smoking int he UK in 1995.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Attorney-General if he will list the official visits paid to Buckinghamshire by Ministers in his Department since 2 May 1997. [64133]

The Attorney-General: The Solicitor-General visited the Buckinghamshire branch of the Crown Prosecution Service on 13 August 1997.

PRIME MINISTER

Council of Europe

Ann Keen: To ask the Prime Minister if he will announce the composition of the United Kingdom delegation for the January 1999 ordinary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. [64792]

The Prime Minister *[pursuant to his reply, 17 December 1998, c. 646]:* The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) has been appointed as a full representative from the Minority Parties as a replacement for the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock), who becomes a substitute representative.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if the term average cost, with reference to flights by Ministers in her Department, refers to average cost per passenger. [64724]

Mr. Foulkes: The average cost refers to the average cost per trip and not average cost per passenger.

Misappropriated Aid

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of the amount of her Department's expenditure overseas which was misappropriated through corruption or fraud in recipient countries in each of the last three years; and what action her Department takes *(a)* to monitor such activities and *(b)* to ensure that consequent losses are minimised. [64800]

Mr. Foulkes: The figures requested are as follows: nil in 1995–96; £6,287 in 1996–97, and £58,293 in 1997–98. This Department gives a high priority to ensure regularity, propriety and value for money in the expenditure of aid funds. Departmental staff and aid recipients are required to follow detailed procedures and to keep comprehensive financial records. Where fraud is discovered, staff are expected to take action to recover the amounts lost, and to pursue prosecution wherever possible. Our control systems are under constant review by our internal auditors and are subject to examination by the National Audit Office. Full details of DFID's procedures for authorising and accounting for expenditure are set out in the Department's Office Instructions, copies of which are in the Library of the House.

Departmental Contracts

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has received concerning the number of her Department's contracts whose management is available for tender to UK based non-Governmental organisations; and if she will make a statement. [64797]

Mr. Foulkes: We have not received any such representations.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list, for the latest year for which figures are available, the names of UK based non-Governmental organisations who acted as contractors or managers of her Department's projects, programmes and activities and the *(a)* number and *(b)* total value of contracts for each manager or contractor. [64798]

Mr. Foulkes: The table lists, for 1997–98, the UK based organisations registered as charities which we have been able to identify as having acted as contractors or managers of my Department's projects; the number of contracts awarded to each; and the total value:

NGO	*Number*	*Total value (£)*
Accord	2	31,156
Action for Disability	1	30,620
ACTIONAID	2	2,294,840
Active Learning Centre	1	44,775
Association of Commonwealth Universities	1	4,919
Bentham Moxon Trust	2	37,819
British Executive Service Overseas	1	1,987
British Overseas NGOs for Development	1	20,928
Care International UK	2	10,927
Charities Aid Foundation	2	98,150
Childrens Aid Direct	1	98,332
Christian Aid	1	45,484
Education for Development	1	12,486
Fauna and Flora International	2	202,525
Hamlet Trust	1	76,936
Henry Doubleday Research Association	1	22,650
International Alert	1	12,973
International Family Health	25	604,879
International Planned Parenthood Federation	1	78,800
International Records Management Trust	8	1,549,228
International NGO Training and Research Centre	1	249,717
Intermediate Technology Development Group	1	1,442
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	1	6,000
Living Earth Foundation	1	167,370
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	34	875,819
Overseas Development Institute	21	1,254,506
Oxfam	3	35,291
Population Services International	1	1,587,019
Royal Agricultural College	1	14,288
Royal Botanic Gardens	2	168,867
Save the Children Fund	5	199,343
Scottish Council for Research in Education	1	25,654
Traidcraft Exchange	2	24,000
World Wide Fund for Nature	1	13,860
Zoological Society of London	1	30,246

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the numbers of her Department's contracts which were available for tender to UK based managers in each year since 1994. [64799]

Mr. Foulkes: The following table lists the number of contracts let in the UK, from 1994–95, for which we have sought proposals. These contracts cover a wide variety of skills including management. Disaggregated figures for contracts limited to management functions, contracts with management components and contracts not available to UK consultants could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Year	*Number of contracts*
1994–95	1,068
1995–96	1,512
1996–97	2,003
1997–98	1,995

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Television Licence Evasion (Colchester)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the current estimated number of households which evade payment of a television licence in the Colchester constituency; and what plans he has to reduce the level of evasion. [62188]

Janet Anderson: The estimated national television licence fee evasion rate was 7.2 per cent. at the end of March 1998 and is expected to fall significantly by the end of the current financial year. Information below national level is not available in a comparable form. TV Licensing, which carries out the day to day administration and enforcement of the television licensing system as agent for the BBC, adopts all appropriate measures to minimise evasion throughout the United Kingdom.

Sport (Girls)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the proportion of girls who give up sport upon leaving school. [63432]

Mr. Banks: This Department has not made any estimate of the proportion of girls who have given up sport upon leaving school.

The 1994 Young People and Sport Survey, which focused on ages 6–16 and was carried out by the then GB Sports Council, showed that, at age 16, the participation rate for girls in sport was 77 per cent. The 1996 General Household Survey, which focused on age 16 and over, showed that the participation rate in the age group 16–19 was 79 per cent. The same surveys show that the participation rates were 81 per cent. at ages 14–15, but fell to 70 per cent. at ages 25–29. However, direct comparisons are not appropriate because of the different nature of the two surveys.

The English Sports Council (ESC) will be undertaking its next Young People and Sport Survey next year. The survey is likely to focus on the participation rates of girls in sport in more detail.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what initiatives are planned by his Department to encourage more girls to become involved in sport. [63433]

Mr. Banks: I have made clear my determination to encourage more women and girls into sport at all levels and am working closely with my Ministerial colleagues and others to ensure this.

The English Sports Council (ESC), through which this Department's funding for sport is channelled, had a range of activities designed to encourage and promote women and girls in sport. Initiatives aimed specifically at young people come under the umbrella of the National Junior Sports Programme which brings together education sectors and local communities to develop interest in sport at an early age and help young people develop basic sports skills. Specific initiatives include:

Top Play: an initiative run in conjunction with the Youth Sport Trust, which teaches core sporting skills to 4–9 year olds;

Top Sport: also run in conjunction with the Youth Sport Trust, which introduces 7–11 year olds to sports and games;

Coaching for Teachers: run in conjunction with the National Coaching Foundation, which offers tailored sports training for teachers; and

Sportsmark and Sportsmark Gold: which awards secondary and special schools for their work on sport in the curriculum.

In addition, the ESC is piloting an initiative, 'Girl Sport', aimed specifically at promoting the benefits of sport for girls and encouraging more girls to participate in sport. Also, the ESC is aiming, next Spring, to publish a National Action Plan for Women which will encourage organisations to sign up to specific targets to increase the number of girls involved in sport by 2001, including:

a 20 per cent. increase in the number of girls who are members of sports clubs;

a 20 per cent. increase in the number of secondary school age girls who take part in at least 3 sports on a regular basis; and

a 20 per cent. increase in the number of girls who participate in sport in their leisure time.

A major force for helping more women and girls into sport is coming through the National Lottery. Organisations are required to include ways of encouraging the participation of women and girls when applying for monies from the Lottery Sports Fund. This is now helping to increase participation levels in a range of sports.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63793]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* All Non-Departmental Public Bodies falling under my Department are covered by the reserved matter of equal opportunities defined by Section L.2 of Head L of Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998 and by the first exception to that. The following bodies may be designated as cross-border public authorities and therefore be subject also to the second exception:

Name of Body	*Current number of UK employees*
British Library	2,413
Theatre Trust	6
British Tourist Authority	161.5
Museums and Galleries Commission	43
National Heritage Memorial Fund	152

All these bodies are responsible for ensuring that they meet the equal opportunities requirements set out in law.

World Heritage Sites

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the organisations in England involved in reviewing world heritage site nominations as a result of the Government's recent consultation. [64423]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Committee of experts set up at the request of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to recommend sites in England for inclusion in a new UK Tentative List of potential World Heritage Sites comprised representatives from the following organisations:

English Heritage (Chair)
The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England
The Joint Nature Conservation Committee
The International Union for the Conservation of Nature
The Local Authority World Heritage Forum
The Cathedrals Advisory Commission for England
The International Council on Monuments and Sites (UK)
The Countryside Commission.

Officials from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport also attended the meetings of the Committee.

Healthy Living Centres

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to ensure that New Opportunities Fund support for healthy living centres addresses issues of social exclusion in rural areas. [64472]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* The Policy Directions issued to the New Opportunities Fund make it clear that the primary aim of the healthy living centre initiative is that the centres should target people in communities with the worst health and greatest health inequalities, including those in pockets of deprivation within rural areas which may not be readily identifiable as deprived under the current criteria for determining deprivation. A particular emphasis is placed on ensuring that the centres are accessible to people who experience disadvantage, or who have difficulty accessing existing health facilities and services.

The National Lottery Act 1998 requires the New Opportunities Fund to draw up a strategic plan containing its assessment of needs and its priorities in dealing with them, on which it must consult the Secretary of State. This ensures that there is a proper strategy for distributing Lottery proceeds. The Fund is currently consulting on its draft strategic plan and looking at ways it will focus on the most disadvantaged 20 per cent. of the population. The Fund proposes to give particular priority to, among others, deprived rural areas.

In addition, the Fund may encourage applications of particular types, or in particular geographical areas, and use the new power of solicitation where sufficient applications are not forthcoming.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what criteria are used to assess applications for funding of healthy living centres from the New Opportunities Fund. [64471]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* The New Opportunities Fund is currently consulting on its application guidance and developing its assessment criteria, but for healthy living centres the criteria will include consideration of the benefit to deprived communities and groups; additionality to mainstream health provision; innovation and quality of provision; community and user involvement; equality and access to the project; links with local health improvement programmes and targets, and relevant national health strategies; links with broader local strategic planning and programmes (including community plans and regeneration programmes); and sustainability beyond the life of the grant.

John Boyd Textiles Ltd.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received on the future of John Boyd Textiles Ltd. of Castle Cary and the historic horsehair looms used by that company. [64474]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* None. However, I understand that an application for planning permission for the conversion of buildings at the site to residential units has been submitted to South Somerset District Council. Oversight of the development control system is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Industrial Machinery

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what protection is available for industrial machinery to ensure processes of historical and cultural importance can continue. [64473]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* Where a building is listed as being of special architectural or historic interest any alteration to it, including the removal of machinery, would require listed building consent from the local planning authority. However, the refusal of consent to remove machinery would not necessarily mean that the machinery would continue in use; this is a matter for the owners of the buildings and the machinery.

Social Exclusion (Sport)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on how the Government's objectives to eliminate social exclusion in sport are being realised. [63426]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* This Government are committed to eliminating the barriers which prevent people from participating in sport. We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in and enjoy sport, regardless of class, gender, ethnic background, age or ability.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 14 December that as part of the Departmental Spending Review outcome sport will receive increased Government funding of almost £8 million over the next 3 years, some £2 million more than the £6 million already announced in July. The extra funding will not only help the UK Sports Council with the lead role we all want to see it play in UK sport, but will contribute to the existing range of provisions that the English Sports Council (ESC) makes in the field of social inclusion.

The National Lottery is also making a major impact in addressing the needs of communities up and down the country, both in terms of sport and the other good causes. The Lottery Sports Fund has now provided grants totalling £900 million to over 4,000 capital projects.

Sports projects in economically deprived regions can apply for additional Lottery support under the ESC's 'Priority Areas Initiative'. The recent reforms to the National Lottery will help to encourage distributors to consider how their strategies for the lottery will contribute to better access, neighbourhood regeneration, and the reduction of economic and social deprivation.

We are working towards the goal of social inclusion in a variety of other ways. I am the 'lead' Minister for a Policy Action Team which has been set up to examine best practice in the use of arts and sports projects in deprived areas. The Team draws together officials from a number of government departments with practitioners in the field of community sports provision, and will report in May 1999. My Department is also developing a new strategy for sport, which will set out some clear principles and targets for future developments in this area. I am especially keen to see the issue of equal opportunities in sport tackled more directly, and the strategy will demonstrate ways in which this can be achieved.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63959]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department has let one contract for public opinion research since May 1997. In order to preserve commercial confidentiality I am unable to provide details of the cost. A total of £243,146 has been spent on newspaper advertising for the following posts.

		£
Arts Council	Chair	8,751.99
Arts Council	Members	18,346.69
BBC	Governors	40,486.98
DCMS	2 posts	4,701.00
English Sports Council	Chair and Members	12,474.00
General broadcasting covering:		23,372.29
BSC	Chair and Members	
ITC	Deputy Chair	
Radio Authority	Members	
National Lottery Commission	Chief Executive and Commissioners	19,387.50
National Lottery Charities Board	Chair	17,945.80
National Heritage Memorial Fund	Chair	5,883.28
New Opportunities Fund	Chair and Members	35,490.88
National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts	Chief Executive	14,057.21
	Chair and Members	23,536.00
S4C	Chair and Members	4,712.00
UK Sports Council	Members	28,972.29
Recouped from Welsh Office		-4,801.00
Recouped from Scottish Office		-7,039.00
Recouped from Northern Ireland Office		-3,132.00

No expenditure has been made on television or radio advertising or direct mail.

Regional Arts Councils

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the method and formula used to determine funding for the regional arts councils. [63984]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Arts Council expects the Regional Arts Boards to receive average increases in funding of 19 per cent. in 1999–2000, 11 per cent. in 2000–01 and 4 per cent. in 2001–02 in total. The Arts Council will fully fund the Regional Arts Board for each arts organisation that is delegated to them. They will also receive an element of flexible funding which will be related to factors such as deprivation, as well as population.

Film Production (United Kingdom)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what contribution United Kingdom produced films have made to the annual balance of trade for each of the last five years for which figures are available; [64913]

(2) what contributions have been made to the annual balance of trade by overseas companies using film production services in the United Kingdom, for each of the last five years for which figures are available. [64914]

Janet Anderson: The contributions made to the UK balance of payments for each of the years 1993 to 1997 by *(a)* overseas sales of, royalties and rental payments for United Kingdom produced films and *(b)* the use of film production, processing, printing, editing etc. services in the United Kingdom by overseas companies are shown in the table.

Export earnings of UK film companies

£ million

	UK produced films	*Use of UK film production, printing, editing etc. facilities*	*Total*
1993	459	128	587
1994	516	177	693
1995	560	227	787
1996	686	202	888
1997	465	207	672

Source:
Office for National Statistics (news release ONS(98)359)

Subtitling and Sign Language

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) and the hon. Member for Maidenhead of 8 December 1997, *Official Report*, column 468, what replies he received from cable and satellite broadcasters following his request that they state their plans to make their services more accessible to viewers with hearing difficulties. [65240]

Janet Anderson: I am placing a summary of the responses received in the Library of the House. My officials are holding a series of meetings with the broadcasters; the major groups representing viewers with hearing difficulties; and the subtitling providers to discuss what scope there is for improving the level of subtitling on cable and satellite channels and what impediments broadcasters face in increasing the current level of provision.

Television Licences

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number of premises with a television licence for (i) colour and (ii) black and white televisions where there is more than one receiver and *(b)* how many of these contain (A) one to 10, (B) 10 to 20, (C) 20 to 50 and (D) more than 50 sets; and if he will estimate the extra revenue gained by the BBC if each set required a licence. [65165]

Janet Anderson: Information is not held centrally on the numbers of television sets installed in non-domestic premises other than hotels, and even for hotels information is not held in the form requested. The available statistics on domestic television ownership show only the number of households without television, those with one set and those with more than one set, broken down into colour and black and white. Over 60 per cent. of households with colour television have more than one colour set; a further 7 per cent. of households with colour television have an additional black and white set and a similar proportion of households with only black and white television have more than one set. Charging all households with more than one television set an additional licence fee would raise an estimated £1,320 million in extra television licence fee revenue, assuming that levels of television ownership remained unchanged.

QUEST

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the annual budget will be for the departmental body QUEST . [65236]

Mr. Chris Smith: The allocations for my Department which I published on 14 December 1998 included a sum of £500,000 in each of the financial years 1999–2000, 2000–2001 and 2001–2002 for the operation of Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team (QUEST).

Museums and Galleries (Free Admission)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to introduce universal free admission to museums and galleries by 2002. [64648]

Mr. Chris Smith: I announced on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 589, that funds had been allocated in two stages to allow Trustees of currently charging national museums in England to introduce free admission for children in 1999–2000 and pensioners in 2000–01. This reflects our expectation that they will endorse the first two stages of our programme to widen access.

Funds have also been set aside to enable those national museums and galleries in England that wish to offer universal free access in 2001–02 to do so, and discussions about this will take place between my Department and the museums over the coming year.

Decisions about free entry will continue to be a matter for the Trustees of individual museums.

Broadcasting Licences (Religious Organisations)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to allow religious organisations to obtain national broadcasting licences; and if he will make a statement. [64839]

Janet Anderson: I have no such plans. The Broadcasting Act 1990 disqualifies groups whose objectives are wholly or mainly of a religious nature from holding a terrestrial national radio licence issued by the Radio Authority.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Green State Scheme

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the advantages of introducing a policy analogous to the Green State scheme established in Sweden and Norway. [62974]

Mr. Meale: We are not aware of such a scheme.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment the Government have made of the advantages and disadvantages of establishing NATS as a non-profit making organisation. [64570]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) on 22 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *366*. The Government are consulting interested parties on their preferred option of a public/private partnership for NATS, and will take account of responses to the consultation in taking final decisions. The consultation period will end on 31 January 1999.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the re-payment cost of the public/private partnership for London Underground; [64571]

(2) what proportion of the repayment costs of the public/private partnership for London Underground will be covered *(a)* by Government and *(b)* by the Greater London Authority from the revenues generated by congestion charges or parking levies. [64572]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the public/private partnership for the Underground, London Underground will pay to the private sector a fee based on availability and performance of infrastructure. The work to date, to develop the contract structure and model the financial relationships, which is still being refined, suggests that, over the life of the concession, this fee and all the Underground's operating costs could be covered from London Underground revenues. Details of the estimated payments cannot be divulged, as to do so might compromise the public sector's ability to achieve value for money in the competition for the infrastructure contracts.

People's Question Time

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what procedures will be in place to ensure that the proposed People's Question Time for the London Mayor and the Assembly of the Greater London Authority will be *(a)* publicised by means accessible to people with sensory disabilities, *(b)* in buildings which are accessible to disabled people and *(c)* equipped to offer communication support to deaf and hard of hearing people who might attend. [64488]

Mr. Raynsford: The GLA will need to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 when deciding how best to publicise People's Question Time and its other public meetings and whether to hold them in the GLA building or other suitable locations. The GLA's own building will be built to a specification which as a minimum meets the standards set out in current legislation. Specific requirements have yet to be finalised, but I would expect the building to be equipped to meet the needs of all disabled people. For example, I envisage that the chamber and committee rooms would be equipped with induction loops for the hard of hearing.

Local Government (Church Representatives)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if church representatives who serve on local education committees, will be able to retain an executive role in any of the new political structures proposed in "Modern local government: In Touch with the People", Cm 4014. [64489]

Mr. Raynsford: Our intention is that the new political structures will safeguard the present ability of church representatives to contribute to decision taking on the planning and provision of education services.

Capital Receipts (Ipswich)

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the capital receipts initiative in Ipswich. [64664]

Mr. Raynsford: Ipswich Borough Council received a total allocation of £1.570 million under the Capital Receipts Initiative (CRI) in 1997–98 and 1998–99 (£368,000 and £1,202,000 respectively). Returns from the authority show that two thirds of these resources are to be used to refurbish the authority's own stock. This will mean improvements mostly targeted at providing improved heating and insulation, to over 3,000 local authority properties. The remaining resources are being used to support RSL new build (14 per cent.), on renovation grants and home repair (8 per cent.) and for community safety and other improvements (10 per cent.). The Council's CRI allocation for 1999–2000 is £1.330 million.

Merchant Fleet

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action his Department has taken to maintain the size of the United Kingdom's merchant fleet. [64528]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A shipping policy paper—"British Shipping: Charting a new course"—was published by the Deputy Prime Minister on 16 December. This sets out the Government's strategy for revitalising the British merchant fleet.

Properties (Newcastle upon Tyne)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many privately owned and rented properties were vacant in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne in each of the last five years; and if he will estimate a vacancy rate for privately owned and rented properties in those years. [64680]

Mr. Raynsford: The number of privately owned and rented properties that were vacant in the City of Newcastle in each of the last five years are as follows:

Year	*Number*	*Per cent.*
1994	4,679	6.4
1995	4,339	5.9
1996	4,191	5.6
1997	4,385	5.8
1998	4,455	5.8

A1

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* highway improvement and *(b)* major highway maintenance have been carried out along the A1 corridor from the Eighton Banks interchange north to the Scottish Border in the last three years; indicating the length in mileage and duration of the works involved. [64681]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 11 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked "What highway improvement and major highway maintenance has been carried out along the A1 corridor from Eighton Banks interchange to the Scottish Border in the last three years?".

The tables attached set out the information you require.

The durations shown are the duration of the works, and do not reflect the extent of any lane closures, etc on the A1. For example, the Lobley Hill to River Derwent scheme was completed using night time only closures resulting in little or no delays to traffic throughout the 3 month contract period.

I trust the above information meets your requirement.

Highways Maintenance schemes carried out on the A1 between Eighton Banks and the Scottish Border (over £50k) November 1995—November 1998

Scheme	Length in miles	Duration
A1 Scremeston Roundabout	0.25	2 weeks
A1 Smearfield	0.75	2 weeks
A1 Kingsway to Lobley Hill	1.5	2 months
A1 Lobley Hill to Blaydon Bridge	0.2	1 week
A1 South of Alnwick	0.8	2 weeks
A1 Fenwick Stead to Granary	0.5	2 weeks

Highways Maintenance schemes carried out on the A1 between Eighton Banks and the Scottish Border (over £50k) November 1995—November 1998

Scheme	Length in miles	Duration
A1 Hitchcroft to Cawledge	1.4	1 month
A1 West Moor Felton	0.4	2 weeks
A1 Scremeston Roundabout South	0.8	2 weeks
A1 Warneford South	0.5	2 weeks
A1 North of River Coquet	0.4	2 weeks
A1 Detchart Junction	0.3	2 weeks
A1 Fenwick North	0.65	2 weeks
A1 Ancroft to Cat Inn	0.65	3 weeks
A1 Lobley Hill to River Derwent	1.83	3 months
A1 Warneford North	0.6	2 weeks
A1 Buckton	0.7	2 weeks
A1- A6105 Highfields Roundabout	0.57	3 weeks
A1 Berwick Bypass	1.5	1 week

Highway improvements carried out on the A1 between Eighton Banks and the Scottish Border (over £50k) November 1995—November 1998

Scheme	Length in miles	Duration
A1 Seven Mile House to Stannington Bridge (Marginal Strips/Maintenance)	2.1 miles	3 months
A1 Hitchcroft to Cawledge (Additional C/Way)	1.7 miles	6 months
A1 Hitchcroft to Cawledge Southbound carriageway (Marginal Strips/Maintenance)	1.4 miles	1 month
A1 Lobley Hill Junction (Partial Signal Control)	Not applicable	2 weeks
A1 Loughend Farm (Diverge Taper)	Not applicable	3 weeks
A1/C137 Burgham Farm Junction (Junction improvement)	Not applicable	1 month
A1/B1342 Belford Junction (Diverge Taper)	Not applicable	1 month

Other Minor Schemes	
Signing/Roadmarking	11
Red surfacing at junctions	20
Safety Fencing	8
Anti-skid treatment	2
Speed Cameras	5
Cycle Crossings	3
Central Reservation Hardening	2

Local Government Finance (North Yorkshire)

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the social services standard spending assessment for North Yorkshire has increased by 0.5 per cent. in the next financial year; and if he will make a statement. [64584]

Ms Armstrong: Calculations underlying the 1999–2000 social services standard spending assessment (SSA) for North Yorkshire are set out in the draft Local Government Finance Report (England) for 1999–2000. The 0.5 per cent. increase in the social services SSA reflects a 5.8 per cent. increase due to control totals, a 5.2 per cent. decrease due to changes in the method of calculation and a 0.1 per cent. decrease due to incorporating the latest data in the indicators used to calculate the SSA.

Changes to the method of calculation for 1999–2000 have been made, following research and discussion with local government, where we are satisfied that they are justified and lead to a fairer system overall. The main changes affecting North Yorkshire are the new method of calculating the SSA for children's social services and the exclusion of residents of institutions from the elderly residential formula. I will shortly be meeting a delegation from North Yorkshire County Council to discuss the proposed settlement.

Domiciliary Care

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors were considered in calculating the estimate of locally generated income from charges within the social services elderly domiciliary care standard spending assessment. [64577]

Ms Armstrong: Local authorities have complete discretion on whether to charge for non-residential social services provided for the elderly. They are also free to set the amount of any charge. The change was made because it is not fair to assume that each local authority can raise the same amount in charges irrespective of the ability of those receiving services to contribute towards their cost. This is supported by statistical evidence which shows that, the higher the proportion of pensioners receiving Income Support in an authority, the smaller the contribution that charges make to the cost of providing such services. In examining possible statistical evidence, the following indicators were also considered: pensioners living alone, pensioners in rented accommodation, elderly with a limiting long term illness and the needs index which was used in the Other Social Services standard spending assessment formula before 1998–99.

Elderly Residential Care

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the reasons are for no longer including those in residential care, nursing homes and long-stay hospitals when counting the number of people aged 65 years or more for the purposes of calculating the social services elderly residential care standard spending assessment; what assessment he has made of the consequences of this change for local

authorities with large numbers of elderly people in residential care, nursing homes and long-stay hospitals; and if he will phase the change in over three years. [64579]

Ms Armstrong: The formula was changed in response to three concerns. First, the previous formula penalised local authorities which placed people in accommodation beyond their boundaries. Such placements counted towards the standard spending assessment for the receiving authority rather than the placing authority. Secondly, the previous formula included people who are funding their own care and are no financial burden on the local authority. Thirdly, the change to the method of calculation makes the formula more consistent with the research on which it was based. That research examined the characteristics of people in private households who were on the point of admission to residential care.

We propose to make this change to standard spending assessments in 1999–2000. SSA Reduction grants will be provided to authorities whose total SSA is reduced substantially through changes in the method of calculation.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the councils for which the prediction under the standard spending assessment formula for the number of elderly people needing residential and nursing care in 1999–2000 is smaller than the prediction for 1998–99, indicating the difference in each case; and what steps he plans to take as a result. [64580]

Ms Armstrong: Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs) are measures of relative need rather than absolute need. The elderly residential services SSA involves estimating each authority's share of the national total of people requiring residential or nursing care. The change in the method of calculating SSAs and in the data used have led to changes in each authorities' share of the national total of potential elderly supported residents. A table showing these figures has been placed in the House Library.

SSA Reduction grants are provided to authorities whose total SSA is reduced substantially as a result of changes to the method of calculation.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the impact on social services of meeting the cost of funding those persons who have taken up places in a private capacity in a residential or nursing home but whose capital subsequently falls below £16,000; [64582]

(2) what research he has undertaken into the predicted increase in demand for residential and nursing care for elderly people in *(a)* urban, *(b)* rural and *(c)* seaside areas in the next year. [64581]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

No such assessment has been made. Local authorities have the lead in arranging and funding social care and it is for them to determine the need for services in their area. They have a responsibility to obtain high quality of care for their clients and value for money, taking into account local priorities and other sources of support available to individuals. The Community Care (Residential Accommodation) Act 1998 was enacted on 11 August and guidance was issued to local authorities concerning residents whose capital falls below £16,000. We are not aware of any major problems in this area.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the revised 1998–99 standard spending assessment base is for each local authority with responsibility for social services, taking into account the absorption of the special transitional grant for social services and the early years grant for education; what his policy is on publishing revised bases; and if he will recalculate for each such authority the published growth in standard spending assessment on the basis of the formula for carrying forward the special transitional grant for 1998–99 and previous years. [64574]

Ms Armstrong: When calculating growth in standard spending assessments for each authority, our policy has been to make adjustments to the base year where there are significant changes in responsibility and where funding amounts for changes in responsibility for each authority are available. To adjust in the manner requested for calculating growth between 1998/99 and 1999/2000, however, is not appropriate in the light of the Comprehensive Spending Review which started from a zero base, looking at expenditure needs afresh. The only fair comparison for social services is to look at total resources provided which, in aggregate, show a 6.1 per cent. cash increase or a 3.5 per cent. real terms increase between 1998/99 and 1999/2000. The increased resources we are making available will meet the costs of looking after existing and new community care clients, and enable local authorities to deliver real improvements in services.

There has been no absorption of the Early Years Grant for Education into SSAs for 1999/2000. The same amount of Early Years Grant is available in 1999/2000 as in 1998/99.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will define the criteria under which local authorities will be capped for excessive spending. [65285]

Ms Armstrong: No.

We have abolished crude and universal capping. My right hon. Friend will decide, after councils have set their budgets, whether capping is necessary in 1999/2000 and the principles for designation he will adopt if it is necessary.

Youth Work

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many youth work posts were funded by local authorities in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1993 and *(c)* 1990. [64513]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not centrally available.

Conservation Areas

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to designate additional locations as special areas of conservation; and if he will make a statement. [64718]

Mr. Meale: Apart from 10 sites which have already consulted upon but not yet submitted, the UK list of candidate SACs is now complete. We are confident that our list is scientifically robust and in accordance with the requirements of the Habitats Directive.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the locations that he has designated as special areas of conservation since 1 May 1997. [64717]

Mr. Meale: A full list of all 333 areas which have been submitted to the European Commission as candidate Special Areas of Conservation by the United Kingdom is as follows:

Name of candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC)	*Date site submitted to EC*	*Date of submission of amended site*
Achmore Bog	14 October 1996	—
Afon Teifi/River Teifi	20 June 1998	—
Afon Tywi/River Tywi	1 October 1998	—
Arnat Woods	15 June 1995	—
Ardgour Pinewoods	26 March 1998	—
Ardmeanach	15 June 1995	—
Asby Complex	8 January 1996	20 March 1998
Avon Gorge Woodlands	8 January 1996	—
Ballochbuie	20 June 1998	16 March 1998
Ballynahone Bog	15 June 1995	—
Bankhead Moss, Beith	26 March 1998	—
Barnack Hills and Holes	20 March 1998	—
Barry Links	15 June 1995	—
Bath and Bradford-on-Avon Bats	8 January 1996	—
Beer Quarry and Caves	15 June 1995	—
Beinn a'Ghlo	14 October 1996	—
Beinn Dearg	14 October 1996	—
Beinn Iadain and Beinn na h'Uamha	14 October 1996	—
Ben Alder and Aonach Beag	14 October 1996	26 March 1998
Ben Heasgarnich	14 October 1996	—
Ben Lawers	14 October 1996	
Ben Lui	14 October 1996	—
Ben Nevis	17 October 1996	—
Ben Wyvis	17 October 1996	—
Benacre to Easton Bavents Lagoons	15 June 1995	—
Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast	14 October 1996	16 March 1998
Berwyn	15 June 1995	20 March 1998
Birklands and Bilhaugh	15 June 1995	—
Black Bog	15 June 1995	—
Black Loch Moss	26 March 1998	—
Black Wood of Rannoch	15 June 1995	—
Blawhorn Moss	15 June 1995	—
Blean Complex	15 June 1995	20 March 1998
Bollihope, Pikestone, Eggleston and Woodland Fells	20 March 1998	—
Border Mires, Kielder—Betterburn	14 October 1996	20 March 1998
Borrowdale Woodland Complex	15 June 1995	—
Brachead Moss	15 June 1995	16 March 1998
Braunton Burrows	8 January 1996	20 March 1998
Breckland	8 January 1996	—
Bredon Hill	15 June 1995	—
Burnham Beeches	20 June 1998	—
Burry Inlet: Dunes/Cilfach Burry: Twyni	15 June 1995	—
Burry Inlet: Saltmarsh and Estuary/Cilfach Burry: Cors heli ac Aber	8 January 1996	—
Caenlochan	17 October 1996	26 March 1998
Cairngorms	17 October 1996	26 March 1998
	—	1 October 1998
Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands	8 January 1996	26 March 1998
Cannock Extension Canal	15 June 1995	—
Cardigan Bay/Bae Ceredigion	8 January 1996	—
Carn nan Tri-Tighearnan	8 January 1996	—
Carrine Common	15 June 1995	—
Castle Eden Dene	15 June 1995	—
Castle Hill	15 June 1995	—
Chesil and the Fleet	14 October 1996	20 March 1998
Chilmark Quarries	15 June 1995	—
Chilterns Beechwoods	15 June 1995	—
Claish Moss and Kentra Moss	14 October 1996	—
Clints Quarry	20 June 1998	—
Clyde Valley Woods	8 January 1996	—
Coalburn Moss	14 October 1996	16 March 1998

Name of candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC)	Date site submitted to EC	Date of submission of amended site
Cockinhead Moss	15 June 1995	26 March 1998
Coed y Cerrig	15 June 1995	—
Coedydd a Cheunant Rheidol/Rheidol Woods	15 June 1995	—
Coedydd Derw Meirion/Meirionnydd Oakwoods	15 June 1995	—
Coladoir Bog	26 March 1998	—
Coleg Glynllifon	15 June 1995	—
Coll Machair	8 January 1996	1 October 1998
Conon Islands	8 January 1996	26 March 1998
Cors Caron	15 June 1995	—
Cors Fochno	15 June 1995	—
Corsydd M–n/Anglesey Fens	15 June 1995	—
Cothill Fen	15 June 1995	—
Cotswold Beechwoods	8 January 1996	—
Craigengar	15 June 1995	—
Cranley Moss	15 June 1995	26 March 1998
Craven Limestone Complex	20 June 1998	—
Creag Meagaidh	14 October 1996	—
Creag nan Garnhainn	15 June 1995	—
Crymlyn Bog/Cors Crymlyn	15 June 1995	—
Cuilcagh Mountain	15 June 1995	—
Culbin Bar	15 June 1995	—
Culm Grasslands	15 June 1995	—
Cwm Cadlan	15 June 1995	—
Dartmoor	8 January 1996	20 March 1998
Denby Grange Colliery Ponds	20 June 1998	—
Derryleckagh	15 June 1995	—
Devils Dyke	20 March 1998	—
Domoch Firth and Morrich More	8 January 1996	—
Dorset Heaths	1 October 1998	—
Dorset Heaths (Purbeck and Wareham) and Studlands Dunes	8 January 1998	1 October 1998
Downton Gorge	8 January 1996	—
Drigg Coast	8 January 1996	—
Drostre Bank	15 June 1995	—
Drumochter Hills	17 October 1996	—
Duddon Mosses	8 January 1996	—
Dungeness	8 January 1996	20 March 1998
Dunkeld-Blairgowrie Lochs	8 January 1996	—
Durness	14 October 1996	—
Dykeneuk Moss	26 March 1998	—
East Devon Pebblebed Heaths	20 June 1998	—
East Hampshire Hangers	15 June 1995	20 March 1998
East Mires and Lubminster	1 October 1998	—
Eastern Mournes	15 June 1995	—
Ebernoe Common	15 June 1995	—
Eilean na Muice Duibhe	15 June 1995	—
Elenydd	15 June 1995	—
Ellers Wood and Sand Dale	20 March 1998	—
Endrick Water	—	16 March 1998
Ensor's Pool	8 January 1996	—
Epping Forest	8 January 1996	—
Eryri/Snowdonia	15 June 1995	20 March 1998
Essex Estuaries	14 October 1996	20 June 1998
Exmoor Heaths	20 March 1998	—
Fairy Water Bogs	15 June 1995	—
Fal and Helford	14 October 1996	20 June 1998
Faray and Holm of Faray	1 October 1998	—
Fardrum and Roosky Turloughs	1 October 1998	—
Fenland	15 June 1995	—
Fenn's, Whixall, Bettisfield, Wern and Cadney Mosses	8 January 1996	—
Feur Lochain	15 June 1995	—
Flamborough Head	8 January 1996	—
Flanders Mosses	14 October 1996	—
Flow of Dergoals	15 June 1995	—
Foinaven	8 January 1996	—
Folkestone to Etchinghill Escarpment	8 January 1996	—
Fontmell and Melbury Downs	8 January 1996	—
Gang Mine	15 June 1995	—
Garron Plateau	15 June 1995	20 March 1998
Garry Bog	15 June 1995	—
Glac na Criche	15 June 1995	—
Glannau M–n: Cors heli/Anglesey Coast: Saltmarsh	15 June 1995	—
Glannau M–n: Twyni/Anglesey Coast: Dunes	15 June 1995	—
Glannau Ynys Gybi/Holy Island Coast	15 June 1995	—
Glan-treath	20 March 1998	—

Name of candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC)	Date site submitted to EC	Date of submission of amended site
Glen Coe	15 June 1995	—
Godrevy Head to St Agnes	15 June 1995	—
Gower Commons/Tiroedd Comin Gwyr	8 January 1996	—
Great Orme's Head/Pen y Gogarth	15 June 1995	—
Great Yews	15 June 1995	—
Grimsthorpe	20 March 1998	—
Hascosay	15 June 1995	—
Helvellyn and Fairfield	15 June 1995	—
Hill of Towanreef	15 June 1995	—
Holme Moor and Clean Moor	15 June 1995	—
Hoy	15 June 1995	—
Inchnadamph	15 June 1995	—
Ingleborough Complex	20 June 1998	—
Insh Marshes	26 March 1998	—
Invernaver	15 June 1995	26 March 1998
Isle of Portland to Studland Cliffs	20 June 1998	—
Isle of Wight Downs	15 June 1995	—
Isles of Scilly Complex	8 January 1996	20 March 1998
Keen of Hamar	15 June 1995	—
Kenfig/Cynffig	15 June 1995	—
Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain	17 October 1996	—
Kilhern Moss	15 June 1995	—
Kingley Vale	15 June 1995	—
Kirkcowan Flow	15 June 1995	—
Largalinny	20 March 1998	—
Lendalfoot Hills Complex	26 March 1998	—
Lewes Downs	15 June 1995	—
Limestone Seacliffs of S. W. Wales/Clogwyni Calchfaen De-orllewin Cymru	15 June 1995	20 March 1998
Lismore Lochs	15 June 1995	—
Yell Sound Coast	1 October 1998	—

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria he used to select locations to be designated as special areas of conservation. [64716]

Mr. Meale: The criteria for the selection of Special Areas of Conservation are set out in Annexe III of the Habitats Directive. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee publication 'The Habitats Directive: Selection of Special Areas of Conservation in the UK' published last October sets out the way in which these criteria were applied in the UK. Copies of that document were placed in the Library of the House at that time.

Water Charging

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what conditions will be imposed on water consumers who wish to change to a tariff-based system of charging. [64542]

Mr. Meale: Under present arrangements, the tariff and method of calculation of water charges and the choices offered to consumers are at the discretion of water undertakers.

The Government propose to introduce increased choice and consumer protection for domestic water customers through the Water Industry Bill, now in Committee. The Bill proposes to give all household consumers the right to change to a measured basis of charging free of initial costs for meter installation. The only restriction on this right would be in cases where it was not reasonably practicable or would involve unreasonable expense. As a further important consumer protection, customers exercising their new right to opt for a meter would have the option of reverting to unmeasured charging after a year.

The Bill also proposes to introduce a new right for consumers currently paying on an unmeasured basis to stay on an unmeasured charge in their present homes, except where they are consuming water for non-essential purposes.

It is proposed to use new powers under the Bill to protect vulnerable customers with high essential water use from measured bills that are higher than average.

The Government also wish to see water companies go beyond these new legal requirements to develop tariffs that offer greater customer choice and have regard both to social and environmental objectives. It will be for companies to introduce new tariffs, which would, under the provisions of the Bill, require the approval of the Director General of Water Services.

Solar Eclipse

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assistance his Department will offer to local authorities in Cornwall to deal with problems arising from the total eclipse of the sun on 11 August 1999. [65032]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government expect the problems arising from the eclipse to be overcome through effective planning and co-ordination in accordance with the principles of Integrated Emergency Management. We are aware that relevant public bodies are working hard locally to ensure that effective arrangements are in place. The Government will be keeping a close watch on developments.

Automatic Train Protection

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to require the provision of automatic train protection. [64668]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are currently considering formal proposals, submitted by the Health and Safety Commission just before Christmas, that would require train protection measures (to stop trains automatically in danger situations) to be fitted to all trains and to key signals by 1 January 2004.

Railtrack

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the adequacy of track maintenance carried out by Railtrack. [64662]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Railtrack and its contractors are required under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that risks to people's health and safety from their work activity are properly controlled. This includes the maintenance of its railway infrastructure. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) monitors Railtrack's compliance with the law.

HSE's Railway Inspectorate has identified some locations where track standards have fallen below an acceptable level. They have reminded Railtrack of its responsibilities and ensured that the appropriate action has been taken to maintain safety. HSE will not hesitate to take further action which they consider appropriate to ensure safety is not being compromised.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the numbers and locations of speed restrictions put in place by Railtrack for safety reasons at *(a)* 1 May 1996, *(b)* 1 May 1997 and *(c)* 1 May 1998 and those on the day responsibility was handed over from British Rail to Railtrack. [64663]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is not held by my Department or the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). There is no specific legislation which requires Railtrack to report details of speed restriction it imposes to the HSE.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the respective roles of the Secretary of State, Rail Regulator and Franchise Director in resolving failures of co-ordination between Railtrack and rail franchisees. [64929]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The general duties of the Secretary of State, the Rail Regulator and the Franchising Director are set out in sections 4 and 5 of the Railways Act 1993.

The Rail Regulator has published a policy statement about the need for more effective consultation and better co-ordination between Railtrack and the train operating companies, and between train operators themselves, on timetable planning. Proposals to introduce a formal consultation process to take place in advance of the timetabling bidding cycle are currently being considered by the rail industry.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what emergency powers he has to override Railtrack and rail franchisee managers where their activities pose a threat to safety and to the national economy. [64930]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Health and Safety Executive have powers under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 to ensure that safety risks to people at work are properly controlled, including the power to take enforcement action. Under section 118 of the Railways Act 1993, in time of "great national emergency" the Secretary of State may give directions to the Rail Regulator, the Franchising Director, the owner or operator of a railway asset, and any provider of railway services.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what penalties have been imposed on *(a)* Railtrack, *(b)* South West Trains and *(c)* other franchisees as a result of failures of co-ordination between Railtrack and franchisees. [64928]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Franchising Director does not have a contractual relationship with Railtrack. Railtrack has regulated commercial agreements with Train Operating Companies which include incentive arrangements. The Franchising Director's franchise agreement with South West Trains includes a performance regime that rewards and penalises improvements and deterioration in punctuality and reliability. Similar arrangements apply to other London commuter franchises and some regional and rural rail services. The cash flows under the regime are published in the OPRAF Quarterly Bulletins, which are in the Library of the House.

Heathrow Express

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the powers available to *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Rail Regulator to control (i) frequency of service and (ii) fare costs on the Heathrow Express. [64666]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Any changes to the frequency of service on the Heathrow Express would be a commercial matter for negotiation between the parties concerned, namely Heathrow Express Operating Company Limited (HEOCL) and Railtrack. Under current legislation, the Heathrow Express service is exempt from licence conditions relating to the level of fares that may be charged. Any modifications to the licence could be obtained only by agreement with HEOCL itself or by reference to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission.

European Council

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of the European Council meeting in Vienna on 11 and 12 December in respect of the integration of environmental requirements into transport policy. [64661]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Transport Council submitted a report on integrating the environment and sustainable development into the transport policy of the Community

to the Vienna European Council. The report, copies of which have been placed in the House Library, sets out details of the progress that has been made to date and of further action that is needed. The European Council welcomed the report and invited the Transport Council to continue its work with a view to submitting a comprehensive strategy, including a timetable for further measures and a set of indicators, to the Helsinki European Council at the end of 1999.

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the implications for fair competition arising out of arrangements entered into by Railtrack and Virgin in respect of the West Coast main line. [64667]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The access agreement between Railtrack and Virgin Trains was approved by the Rail Regulator in June 1998. The regulator considered many public interest duties when approving these access rights, including the development of rail services and the protection of the interests of customers of other train operating companies using the line, both passenger and freight. The proposed Strategic Rail Authority will, when established, set the longer-term framework for competition.

Paddington Station

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the adequacy of track and platform space at Paddington station. [64665]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The adequacy of track and platform space at Paddington Station is a matter for the station operator, Railtrack. The number of platforms available for use at Paddington Station are stated in Railtrack's Railway Safety Case, under which the company is required to operate.

The Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate is satisfied that adequate arrangements are in place for managing congestion at Paddington Station.

Sewage Works (Isle of Wight)

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the timing of the introduction of secondary sewage treatment at the new sewage works under construction at Yaverland, Sandown, Isle of Wight. [65273]

Mr. Meale: The Government announced in September that secondary sewage treatment would be required for all significant coastal outfalls in England and Wales. In cases which were formerly potential derogations to a lower level of treatment, such as Yaverland, we are encouraging water and sewage companies to make as rapid progress as possible with installation of secondary treatment. The timing of improvements to coastal discharges is being discussed between the Environment Agency and individual companies and will be agreed by Ministers early this year, as part of an approved company investment programme.

Professional Drivers

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 in reducing risks to professional drivers and other road users arising from the use of vehicles on the road for work purposes. [64703]

Mr. Meale: There has been no such assessment. The road safety of professional drivers is comprehensively covered by road traffic and other relevant legislation.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to promote management by employers of occupational road risk; and if he will make a statement. [64706]

Mr. Meale: The Government believe that employers should foster working practices which encourage responsible driving. We have therefore supported the work of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, including the publication in 1998 of "Managing Occupational Road Risk", to help organisations develop an effective management approach to road safety.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has made to the Health and Safety Commission about managing the risks to which employees and other road users are exposed when vehicles are driven on the road for work purposes. [64705]

Mr. Meale: I have not made any such representations to the Health and Safety Commission.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce regulations to reduce the risk of road accidents involving vehicles which are driven for work purposes. [64702]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no plans to introduce regulations specifically to reduce the risk of road accidents involving vehicles driven for work purposes. Existing legislation (the Road Traffic Act 1988, related Acts, and associated regulations) already govern driving behaviour.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the proportion of fatal and serious injuries which occurred in road traffic accidents involving one or more vehicles being driven for work purposes. [64701]

Mr. Meale: I have made no such estimate. This information is not collected by the Police. There is no requirement to report traffic accidents involving work-related journeys to the health and safety enforcing authorities under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the system of enforcement of safety regulations relating to the safer system of work for professional drivers. [64704]

Mr. Meale: There has been no such assessment because the road safety of professional drivers is comprehensively covered by road traffic and other

relevant legislation, where HSE has no enforcement role other than where the carriage of dangerous goods is concerned.

Long-haul Flights (Health Hazards)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of health hazards on long-haul flights; and if he will make a statement. [64744]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There is no evidence to suggest that long-haul travel poses particular health hazards for most passengers. However, elderly passengers and those with an existing medical condition may be vulnerable to the environmental and physiological stresses of flight and should seek appropriate advice from both the airline and their general practitioner before flying.

Groundwork

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the forthcoming financial management and policy review of Groundwork. [65312]

Mr. Meale: As part of the Government's programme of regular five-yearly financial, management and policy reviews of non-departmental public bodies, my Department will conduct a thorough review of Groundwork beginning on Tuesday 12 January. The first stage of the review will take the form of a "prior options" study. This will assess the extent to which Groundwork's functions are necessary for the achievement of the Department's policies, and whether there is scope for changing the relationship between the Department and Groundwork to reflect more appropriately the Department's policies for promoting environmental regeneration.

The progress made by Groundwork since the previous review in 1994 will be examined and the results of that examination and of the prior options study will inform a detailed review of the possible mechanisms for funding Groundwork's outputs and, if appropriate, Groundwork's policy and financial management systems.

In carrying out the study, my Department will consult widely with those organisations with an interest in Groundwork's activities. I aim to ensure that any uncertainty caused by the review is kept to a minimum and I therefore expect the FMPR Advisory Group to report by early summer 1999.

Glass Recycling

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets the Government have set for glass recycling; what progress has been made in achieving them; what is the recent trend in the proportion of glass being recycled; and if he will make a statement. [64978]

Mr. Meale: In the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997, there are targets for the recovery and recycling of packaging waste. Currently, businesses obligated under the Regulations must each achieve a minimum recycling target of 7 per cent. per material, including glass.

The recycling rate for glass packaging presently stands at 22 per cent. Although there is no target for the recycling of all glass, ie container and flatglass, present rates stand at 26 per cent.

Recycling rates for all glass have remained fairly constant since 1995. The capacity is available to increase these recycling rates further.

Jubilee Line Extension

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *535*, on London Transport, if he will list the contribution to the cost of the Jubilee Line Extension from *(a)* the private sector and *(b)* London Transport; and when London Transport expects to complete the cost review of the rephased programme. [64952]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As stated in my reply of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *535–36*, some £2 billion of the total cost of the Jubilee Line Extension is being directly funded by Government grant.

The developers of Canary Wharf agreed to make a £400 million contribution, spread over a period ending 25 years after line opening. Some £135 million has already been paid. In addition, contributions totalling £7.5 million have been received from British Gas (further amounts are to be paid, depending on the value of land sales).

The balance of the costs of this project is being met from within LT's total resources. The results of London Transport's current Jubilee Line Extension cost review, which will take into account the change to three-phase opening, are expected shortly.

Railway Board Staff

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many staff employed by the successor companies of the British Railways Board have been made redundant during each of the last three years. [65188]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Best Value

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received as a result of the consultation on best value from *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* contractors to local authorities, *(c)* trade unions and *(d)* others; if he will make a statement in respect of representations made by each of the above categories; and if he will place a copy of the representations received in the Library. [65246]

Mr. Raynsford: The consultation paper "Modernising local government—Improving services through best value" published on 3 March 1998 received 547 responses. A full list of those responding was placed in the House of Commons Library in July (refDEP 98/850), and the individual responses in the DETR Library. A summary of

the responses can be found on the Internet at: http://www/local.detr.gov.uk., and I have sent a paper copy to the hon. Member.

Of those responding, 404 were from local authorities; 9 from contractors; 3 from trade unions; and 131 from others including professional bodies. The responses demonstrated widespread support for our best value proposals.

A number of comments were also received following publication of the White Paper "Modern local government: In touch with the People" published on 30 July 1998 which included proposals on best value which were subsequently reflected in the Local Government Bill now before the House. These confirmed the broad range of support for best value from local authorities, the trade unions, and the private sector.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what involvement private contractors have in the ongoing pilot schemes for the local authority best value programme; if he will list the contractors concerned; and if he will make a statement. [65247]

Mr. Raynsford: The involvement of the private sector in the Best Value pilot programme takes a number of different forms and is one of the factors being evaluated by the Warwick Business School in the two year monitoring programme to be completed in the spring of 2000.

The private sector is more directly involved in the Best Value Partnership Network scheme announced in September 1998. Four involve private sector partners, two are led by the private sector, one by a professional body; and three by local authorities. The table lists the private contractors involved in each of these pilots.

Network	*Private sector partners*
ICE Best Value Taskforce The main objective of the Taskforce is to draw on expertise in the private and public sectors to create a 'Definitive Guide to Best Practice in Advancing Best Value in the Built Environment'	*Led by the Institution of Civil Engineers* Amey Facilities Management Babtie Brophy Grounds Maintenance Brown and Root Buro Happolds Halcrow JDM Midlands Ltd. John Doyle Group Mills & Reeve Mott Macdonald Group Mouchel Consulting Ltd. Parkman Pell Frischmann Consulting Engineers Ringway Highways Services Ltd. Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick Tarmac Heavy Building Materials Thorburn Colqhoun TPS Consult WS Atkins
Public Sector Plc. The network will consider specific local authority projects to consider public private partnership options	*Led by BV Strategies* *Suppliers (private companies)* Bull Information Systems Onyx UK David Cross Leisure Manpower Thames Water Brophy Xerox Bank of Scotland Quintain Amec Associated Holdings Ltd. *Professional and Advisory Group (private companies)* Anthony Collins Solicitors KPMG Chelgate ABROS The Centre SCOTIA
Payroll Partnership Network The proposal is to create a Partnership Network with a private sector partner to secure best value in the operation of a combined payroll service	*Led by Bristol City Council, Bath and North East Somerset Council and South Gloucestershire Council* KPMG
The Hub The network plan to establish Local Franchise Partnerships with local authorities. One of the areas they will focus on is Housing Benefit	*Led by Barony Consulting and ICL* Barony Consulting Ltd. ICL

Two additional networks are led by local authorities. The 'Crossing the Boundaries' network currently consists of five authorities in the West Midlands who are exploring cross boundary collaboration between trading standards departments. The 'North Yorkshire Audit Partnership' consists of three local authorities who are working in partnership for the provision of Internal Audit services through a consortiums approach.

Integrated Transport Commission

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he proposes to use in order to establish the proposed integrated transport commission; how many people he proposes to appoint to such a body; what interests will be represented; how he will make appointments to the body; when he proposes that it should first meet; and if he will make a statement. [65244]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The establishment of the Commission for Integrated Transport was announced in the White Paper, 'A New Deal for Transport' (Cm 3950). It will be a non-statutory, non-Departmental public body that will provide independent advice to Government on the progress of integrated transport policy. It will comprise up to 15 members, including a Chair and Vice-Chair, who will all be selected in accordance with guidance from the Commissioner for Public Appointments; the two senior posts have already been advertised in the national press. All the appointments will be made on merit, with members selected on the basis of their knowledge of and expertise from sectors affected by transport policy and its impacts. We expect the Commission to meet shortly after these appointments have been made.

Bus Priority Schemes (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what allocations his Department has made for bus priority schemes in Gloucestershire for each of the last five years for which figures are available. [64828]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This department does not provide specific funds for bus priority measures. As part of the annual local transport capital settlements, local highway authorities in Gloucestershire were allocated the following capital resources which could have been used on bus priority measures:

Year	*£000*
1995–96	580
1996–97	1,614
1997–98	600
1998–99	700
1999–2000	1,925

Disabled Parking Spaces

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what national guidelines are issued by his Department for the proper identification of disabled parking spaces. [64976]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The signs and road markings used to identify on-street spaces reserved for disabled badge holders are prescribed in the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 1994 (SI 1994 No. 1519). There is no legislation covering the signing of spaces in off-street car parks, but the then Department of Transport published an advisory leaflet in 1995 which covered parking both on and off-street. TAL 5/95 is still available without charge from my Department's Mobility Unit.

Former Railway Formations

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent research his Department has carried out into the commercial viability of re-opening former railway formations for public use; and what plans the Government have to carry out an audit into the potential for such schemes. [64915]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is the responsibility of individual local planning authorities to promote the re-opening of railway lines and stations when considering their future public transport needs. However, in view of the importance of ensuring that sites which have potential for transport use are identified, the British Railways Board has carried out an audit of its remaining sites.

SSSIs

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many prosecutions for damage to sites of special scientific interest have been started under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [64827]

Mr. Meale: The figures requested are shown in the table.

Year	*Number of prosecutions*
1994	0
1995	0
1996	2
1997	1
1998	1

Taxi Accessibility

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will delay implementing regulations on taxi accessibility until the Government have *(a)* considered the representations which it has received and *(b)* undertaken a study into the economic effects of the regulations and their timing; and if he will make a statement. [64975]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are committed to introducing the taxi provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

We have completed a first round of consultation and we have considered the wide range of representations made by the taxi industry, local authorities and disabled people. There will be a further round of consultation later this year on the draft regulations. The consultation will include a Regulatory Impact Assessment, part of which is an assessment of the economic effects of compliance. This will be based on an independent study carried out by Cranfield University.

Otterburn Ranges

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what military issues will be considered in the scope of the re-opened public inquiry into the Otterburn ranges in Northumberland. [65047]

Mr. Raynsford: The issues to be discussed at the re-opened public inquiry into proposals for the Otterburn Training Area in Northumberland are at the Inspector's discretion.

The new issues identified are in the Government Office's letter to parties dated 17 December 1998. I am arranging for the hon. Member to receive a copy and for copies to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate *(a)* the duration of and *(b)* the cost to his Department of the re-opened public inquiry into the Otterburn military ranges in Northumberland. [65049]

Mr. Raynsford: I am unable to be precise about the duration of the re-opened inquiry, although, as the matters for discussion are restricted to new issues that have arisen since the closure of the original inquiry, an approximate estimate would be in the order of four to six weeks. Costs to my Department will involve only minor administrative sums: the larger portion of the costs being borne by the other parties.

Building Materials (Flammability)

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what decisions have been made as to flammability requirements for the exit ways for floor coverings for public buildings within Euro class B of the draft European Construction Products Directive concerning flammability classifications. [65245]

Mr. Raynsford: No decision has yet been taken with regard to the classes (which include considerations of flammability) which categorise the fire performance of floorings under the Construction Products Directive. The proposal for Euroclass B which is to be considered by the Standing Committee for Construction in March 1999 has now been amended, reducing the critical flux (heat flow rate) of materials in this class.

Piccadilly Line

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what work *(a)* is currently being undertaken and *(b)* is planned to upgrade the London Underground Piccadilly Line; what new trains will be provided in each of the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [65065]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Underground are mid-way through a project to refurbish the entire fleet of 87 Piccadilly line trains. Refurbishment of 48 trains is already complete and London Underground expect that refurbishment of the whole fleet will be completed by December 2000.

Although London Underground are not planning to procure any new trains in the next three years for use on the Piccadilly line, there are proposals to refurbish 15 ex-Jubilee line trains and bring these into service on the Piccadilly line. These additional trains will make it possible to run a higher frequency 30 trains per hour (tph) service. London Underground expect that 4 ex-Jubilee line trains will be refurbished by December 2000 and refurbishment of 15 trains will be completed by December 2001.

There are also proposals for the construction of additional platforms at Oakwood and Cockfosters stations and improved access for trains at Cockfosters Depot. This project will provide improved train reversing facilities at the east end of the line in order to enable the introduction of the increased 30 tph service and improve service recovery times following disruptions. London Underground expect the works to start in June 1999 and to be completed by the end of 2001.

Housing

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the number of dwellings in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* Greater London and *(c)* the Edmonton constituency which are leasehold; how many of these in each case are former local authority accommodation; and how many of them are (i) houses and (ii) flats. [65064]

Mr. Raynsford: The different property laws of the countries within the United Kingdom prevent an estimate of leasehold dwellings for the UK. The table, from the Department's Survey of English Housing, provides estimates[1] of the number of dwellings in Greater London and England which are leasehold; how many of them are houses and flats. The Survey of English Housing cannot produce estimates for parliamentary constituencies.

SEH average for 1996–97 and 1997–98

Thousand

	Houses	*Flats*	*All*
Greater London			
Ex LA accommodation	2	82	84
Other accommodation	25	349	374
Total accommodation	27	431	458
England			
Ex LA accommodation	36	141	177
Other accommodation	823	806	1,629
Total accommodation	859	947	1,806

[1] Like all estimates from sample surveys, these figures are subject to sampling variability.

West Midlands RDA

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons *(a)* Herefordshire and *(b)* Worcestershire are not represented on the board of the West Midlands Regional Development Agency; and if he will make a statement. [65111]

Mr. Meale: As was made clear in our White Paper "Building Partnerships for Prosperity", the success of RDAs will largely depend on their boards. Because of this, our primary concern has been to choose people who will make an effective contribution whatever their background. Consistent with this aim, we have also sought to reflect an appropriate balance of regional interests in the composition of boards. However, it should

be remembered Board Members are there to further the success of RDA, not as delegates of a particular area, but to take into account the interests of the region as a whole.

Moths

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the potential impact of the introduction of genetically modified crops on moth populations. [65107]

Mr. Meale: All applications for the release or marketing of genetically modified crops (GM crops) are reviewed in order to assess the potential effects of the GMOs on other species, before a decision is made whether or not to grant a consent. To date, no effects on non-target moths have been identified.

The European Corn Borer, a moth which is an important pest of maize, is susceptible to genetically modified maize varieties which have been modified to be resistant to this pest. Some varieties have been granted approval and are being grown in some European Community countries but, because this species is not a pest in the UK, it is unlikely to be grown here. The evidence suggests that other moths which do not consume the maize would be unlikely to be affected by this product.

The Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE), which advises the Government on releases and marketing of GMOs, has recently extended its remit to consider the wider biodiversity implications, so that any indirect effects of managing the GM crops on farmland wildlife would be assessed, as well as the effects of the GM crops themselves.

The Institute of Arable Crops Research in Rothamsted is carrying out research for the Department to investigate possible non-target effects of GM insect resistant crops on non-target insect species, under closely controlled laboratory conditions. The purpose of this research is to underpin the assessment of risks of that these crops may pose to non-target species. This work is not yet completed and it is too early to give any indications of the results. The final report for this contract will be published when it is completed.

Pesticides Tax

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates he has made of the cost of implementing and operating a tax on pesticides. [65087]

Mr. Meale: The research commissioned by my Department into the scope for a pesticide tax or charge has considered the potential costs of implementation. The Government will take this work fully into account in reaching a decision on whether to introduce such an instrument.

South West RDA

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria he used to select people to serve on the South West Regional Development Agency; how many people representing organisations in Gloucestershire were considered as suitable applicants under this criteria; and if he will make a statement. [64813]

Mr. Meale: The criteria for selection were set out in the information pack for people expressing an interest in serving on the Agency's Board. Copies of the information pack are available in the Library.

Of the 28 people interviewed for the Board, five came from Gloucestershire, although they were not, given the criteria for selection, "representing organisations in Gloucestershire". One of these five Gloucestershire candidates, Nigel Costley, has been appointed to the Board.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to ensure that the particular interests of Gloucestershire are represented on the South West Regional Development Agency; and if he will make a statement. [64848]

Mr. Meale: The role of the boards of regional development agencies is to consider the interests of the region as a whole. Appointments were therefore made on the basis of the expertise that each member brings to the board, rather than to provide representation for particular localities or organisations.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people representing organisations in Gloucestershire expressed interest in serving on the South West Regional Development Agency; which organisations in Gloucestershire proposed people for membership; and if he will make a statement. [64812]

Mr. Meale: The role of the boards of regional development agencies is to consider the interests of the region as a whole. Appointments were therefore made on the basis of the expertise that each member brings to the board, rather than to provide representation for particular localities or organisations.

336 people applied to be members of the Board of the South West Regional Development Agency. Thirty nine of these came from Gloucestershire.

Two organisations in Gloucestershire supported particular applications for board membership.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to ensure that the appointments he has made to the South West Regional Development Agency reflect the geographical spread of the area covered. [64811]

Mr. Meale: The role of the boards of regional development agencies is to consider the interests of the region as a whole.

In making appointments, the Government have sought to ensure that board members bring understanding of the range of conditions existing within their regions. This has resulted in a broadly even geographical spread.

Rail Travel Costs

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the average cost per mile of rail travel based on standard return fares in each EU country. [64647]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not available.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the percentage price increase for *(a)* peak and *(b)* off peak journeys for each of the privatised rail company areas in each year since privatisation. [64651]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not held centrally in the form requested. Rail fares are set by individual Train Operating Companies (TOCs) subject only to limits on increases which the Franchising Director applies to the fares he regulates. The general limit on regulated fares from January 1999 is minus 1 per cent. on the movement in the Retail Prices Index (i.e. the maximum regulated fare increase is 2.5 per cent.). For London Commuter TOCs, the limit varies depending on performance and the average maximum regulated fare increase for 1999 for those is 1.9 per cent. (1.6 per cent. below inflation). There have been many instances of individual unregulated fares being increased above the rate of inflation. Nevertheless, research shows that the average price paid per mile by passengers in 1997–98 was 13.4 pence and this was an increase of 3 per cent. (1 per cent. below inflation) on 1996–97. The research is based on tickets actually sold so 1998–99 data are not yet available, but the Franchising Director will continue to monitor the situation.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will consider exempting accommodation provided wholly or predominantly for tourists from Houses in Multiple Occupation registration schemes. [64833]

Mr. Raynsford: The current statutory definition of a house in multiple occupation may include some accommodation of this type. If so, it would be within the scope of our model registration schemes. Local housing authorities may seek approval for schemes which depart from the models, and we would consider any such request on its merits.

We plan to issue a consultation document on proposals for a HMO licensing scheme early in the New Year. In this, we will also seek views on options for changes to the HMO definition.

A proposal to exempt accommodation provided wholly or predominantly for tourists, in the context either of the existing registration arrangements or of the HMO definition and the proposed licensing scheme, would, however, require careful consideration. Such premises are sometimes let for extended periods outside the holiday season to people with no other home.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the Houses in Multiple Occupation registration scheme; and if he will make a statement. [64835]

Mr. Raynsford: We have made no formal assessment, since we are committed to replacing housing authorities' discretionary powers to make HMO registration schemes with provisions for a compulsory licensing system. However, in the meantime we are encouraging authorities to adopt registration schemes in order to ease the transition to an eventual licensing regime.

Second London Oceans Workshop

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the outcome of the Second London Oceans Workshop. [65307]

Mr. Meale: With Dr. Bernardes, the Brazilian Deputy Minister of the Environment, I had the pleasure of chairing the Second London Oceans Workshop on 10–12 December. The Workshop was attended by representatives nominated by 40 national governments, 14 international agencies and 14 non-governmental organisations.

The theme of the Workshop was the integration of the management of the oceans. The main conclusions started by emphasising the role of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Against this background, the two major problems for the conservation and sustainable use of the seas were seen as over-fishing and other unsustainable fishing practices together with pollution from land-based activities. Shipping, exploitation of sea-bed minerals (including oil and gas), coastal development, dumping of waste and climate change are also sources of problems that need to be addressed.

At the national level, Governments were called on to consider the social economic and environmental values of coastal and marine ecosystems, how to achieve the integrated approach as called for by Programme Area A of Chapter 17 of Agenda 21 (including the involvement of all stakeholders), how to join in international agreements already negotiated and how to report on the status of their seas. International organisations were requested to analyse what is hindering the wider acceptance of international agreements and to consider what can be done to remove the obstacles.

The workshop agreed that the regional level was where international co-operation was most needed. UNEP was called upon to revitalise the Regional Seas Programme and to ensure there was a clear focus for the related tasks. Regional fisheries organisations were requested to adopt clear targets for achieving sustainable catches and to develop indicators for over-fishing. Integrated coastal zone management needed support at the regional level. For shipping, more effective port-state control networks were needed, together with action on the regulation of fleets, alien species, anti-fouling agents and registers.

In the global context, the workshop called for immediate action to implement recent UN fisheries agreements. The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries was also crucial. Revitalising the Global Programme of Action on Land-Based Activities was essential. The environmental management of offshore oil and gas required further initiatives to follow up the success of the Noordwijk Workshop. Because of the range

of interests and organisations necessarily involved, improved coordination is needed. The UN General Assembly should consider how the annual debate on the oceans and the law of the sea can be broadened and better prepared.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensioners (Benefit Targeting)

15. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how he plans to improve the accuracy of his targeting of benefits on the poorest pensioners. [63202]

Mr. Timms: From next April, we will introduce a new minimum income guarantee for pensioners of at least £75 per week for single people, and £116.60 for couples. In the Pensions Green Paper, we announced that, starting from April, we plan to implement changes to the way we deliver the minimum income guarantee so that the system can more accurately pinpoint those pensioners who are likely to be entitled to it.

Social Security Appeals

16. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals against decisions of social security officers *(a)* were made and *(b)* succeeded in each of the last five years. [63204]

Angela Eagle: The following is the information:

Social Security Appeal Tribunals

Year	*New lodgements*	*Appeals heard and decided* *Total*	*Decided in appellant's favour*	*Percentage in appellant's favour*
1993	193,200	77,900	31,200	40
1994	137,100	74,000	33,300	45
1995	125,000	83,400	35,900	43
1996	167,000	111,700	42,400	38
1997	287,200	135,100	45,900	34
1998 (first half)	133,000	98,300	28,500	29

Source:
100 per cent. computer extract from Independent Tribunal Services (ITS) systems

Disability Benefits

17. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact of proposed changes in disability benefits on carers. [63205]

Mr. Bayley: Carers wishing to combine their caring role with employment will benefit from the new emphasis on helping those who can work to do so, whilst providing support for those who cannot. Carers in the same family as the disabled person for whom they provide care should also benefit from some of the proposed changes to the family income. The proposed changes to the contribution conditions for Incapacity Benefit will include specific protection for carers in receipt of Invalid Care Allowance.

28. **Mr. Levitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with disability organisations on his plans for disability benefit reform. [63217]

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend, the Minister of State, discussed the proposals for Disability Benefit reform with representative organisations at regular meetings of the Disability Benefits Forum, set up following the Welfare Reform Green Paper, "New Ambitions for our Country".

We have also discussed Disability Benefit reform more generally with a wide range of organisations representing disabled people and their carers.

31. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his plans to ensure that expenditure on benefits for the disabled is reduced by £750 million. [63220]

Mr. Bayley: Our proposals for reforming benefits for disabled people are not designed to make savings in expenditure but are based on the key principle of work for those who can, security for those who cannot. They will help disabled people to take up and stay in employment, modernise the system and improve provision for severely disabled people with the greatest needs.

Spending on benefits for sick and disabled people has reached almost £25 billion a year and will continue to rise in real terms as we meet increasing demand and seek to do more for those in greatest need.

Stakeholder Pensions

18. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the stakeholder pension proposals. [63207]

Mr. Darling: The Green Paper on pensions; "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions" clearly sets out our proposals for the framework for stakeholder pension schemes.

Benefit Computer Systems

19. **Mr. Caplin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to modernise his Department's benefit computer systems. [63208]

Mr. Timms: As part of our transformation programme, we are already working closely with the private sector in designing and developing the next generation of computer systems fit to support the delivery of a modernised Welfare State.

Disabled People

20. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to improve benefits for disabled people. [63209]

Mr. Bayley: We will modernise the benefits system to help more disabled people take up and stay in work and provide extra help for severely disabled people with the greatest needs. We will shortly bring forward legislation to achieve these aims.

Widows' Pensions

21. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the effect of his proposed changes to the widows' pension arrangements on widows who are currently not entitled to income support. [63210]

Angela Eagle: The proposals set out in the consultation document, "Support in Bereavement", would have no effect on current widows.

Widows who are currently receiving a widow's pension would continue to do so for as long as they satisfy the current qualifying conditions.

It is estimated that, in the first year, in the region of 20,000 widows widowed after implementation of the new scheme would receive Bereavement Allowance and of those around 15 per cent. would become entitled to Income Support after six months.

Pensioners (Heating Bills)

22. **Mr. Bennett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the assistance provided by his Department to pensioners with heating bills. [63211]

Angela Eagle: For a second year we are making Winter Fuel Payments to over seven million pensioner households. The poorest pensioners received their £50 payment before Christmas, and payments to the others are presently being issued.

Late Retirement

23. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans the Government have to encourage later retirement and postponed pension entitlement. [63212]

Mr. Timms: On 10 December 1998, *Official Report* columns 278, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that the Performance and Innovation Unit has now been established. One of its first projects will be to look at how we can improve the well-being and quality of life of older people by helping them to remain active. The Unit has been asked to deliver their conclusions in the summer.

Benefit Expenditure

24. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received regarding the projected level of social security spending over the next five years. [63213]

Mr. Darling: Our approach to welfare reform is principle-driven and not cuts-driven. We are investing in providing extra help for pensioners, for families and for disabled people. Our commitment to prudent public finances and stable economic growth means we are achieving this with half the average annual rate of real growth in benefit expenditure than there was during the last Parliament.

Pensions

25. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress of his Department's pensions review. [63214]

Mr. Timms: The Green Paper "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions", was published on 15 December and my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State made a statement to the House about it on 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 761–80. It sets out our plans for radical reform of the pension system, with the objective that everyone can look forward to a secure retirement.

Means-tested Benefits

26. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what public opinion survey work his Department carries out to assess the effectiveness of means-tested benefits in meeting their objectives. [63215]

Angela Eagle: A number of DSS-sponsored research studies have been carried out to measure public attitudes towards the principle of means-testing. Otherwise, public opinion surveys are used to provide background information rather than to evaluate benefit effectiveness.

Children

27. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to improve the economic situation of children in families in the lowest 10 percentile of income. [63216]

Angela Eagle: We have already taken action to improve the financial position of children in the poorest families. The child personal allowance in the income-related benefits for children under 11 was increased by £2.50 on 9 November 1998. From this April the rate of Child Benefit for the eldest child will increase by £2.50 over the normal uprating for all families, and the Family Premium in the income-related benefits will be adjusted by a similar amount to ensure that the most vulnerable families receive this increase.

Disability Benefits

28. **Mr. Levitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with disability organisations on his plans for disability benefit reform. [63217]

Mr. Bayley: Ministers have met disability organisations at the Disability Benefits Forum set up following the Welfare Reform Green Paper, "New Ambitions for our Country: A New Contract for Welfare", to discuss how disability benefits can be reformed. The Forum has met on seven occasions since June and has discussed the proposals for Disability Benefits reform contained in the discussion document "A New Contract for Welfare: Support for Disabled People" on two occasions.

The Government have also discussed disability benefits more generally with a wide range of organisations representing disabled people and their carers.

Benefit Fraud

29. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received on ways to tackle fraud. [63218]

Mr. Darling: Consultation on the Green Paper, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business: securing the future", ended on 30 September 1998, and 165 responses were received. Around two thirds of the responses came from public and private organisations (including around 50 from local authorities) and the remaining third came from individuals.

The Green Paper set out details of the Government's strategy for tackling fraud and the principles behind it. The great majority of responses supported the strategy and its governing principles.

I am placing in the Library a list of the organisations and academics who responded. Copies of the list and specific responses are available on request from the Department of Social Security, by contacting the Fraud Strategy Directorate, 6th Floor, The Adelphi, 1–11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.

Benefits Agency (Training)

30. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to ensure that Benefits Agency staff are trained in dealing with clients with mental health problems; and if he will make a statement. [63219]

Angela Eagle: The programme of training, available to all BA staff, includes a range of customer service and interpersonal skills courses. They all include training on the needs of special groups within the community, including people with mental health problems.

We are currently working in partnership with groups representing people with mental health problems. They hold workshops specifically geared to meet the needs of staff who have contact with the mentally ill. From April 1999 we intend to extend this partnership by jointly developing and delivering courses where this can add value to our training products.

Tax and National Insurance

32. **Mr. Fabian Hamilton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he has taken to harmonise the arrangements for tax and national insurance contributions. [63221]

Mr. Timms: The Government are committed to modernising the National Insurance contributions system so that it is simpler and easier for employers to understand and operate, and to promoting greater alignment with the tax system in the longer term.

From April 1999, the point at which employers start to pay secondary Class 1 contributions will be raised to a new "earnings threshold" set at the level of the personal tax allowance. The tax and contributions treatment of payments and benefits to employees included in PAYE settlement agreements will be aligned by the introduction of new Class 1B contributions for employers. Also from that date, under the provisions of the Social Security Contributions (Transfer of Functions, etc.) Bill the Contributions Agency will transfer from the Department of Social Security to the Inland Revenue. This will reduce the burdens on businesses and individuals by enabling tax and National Insurance contributions to be processed through one organisation.

Child Support

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many individuals and organisations have responded to the consultation exercise on the Green Paper, "Children First: a New Approach to Child Support." [65037]

Angela Eagle: Written responses to the Green Paper have so far been received from 105 organisations and 1,435 individuals, including over 50 from hon. Members. In addition, my noble Friend Baroness Hollis of Heigham has held meetings with more than 40 organisations, academics and other groups.

All Work Test

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what consultations are taking place regarding the replacement for the all work test for incapacity benefit; when the changes are planned to be introduced; and if he will make a statement. [65068]

Mr. Timms: Our proposals on benefits for those with a long-term illness or disability were published in the consultation document "A new contract for welfare: Support for Disabled People". We will give full consideration to the responses when the consultation period ends on Friday 8 January 1999. In addition a subgroup of the Disability Benefits Forum has been set up to consider proposals for reform of the All Work Test and in particular to examine ways in which the test may be used to provide information to help people claiming incapacity benefits who want to plan a return to work. One meeting has taken place and a further 2 or 3 meetings are planned before the subgroup report back to the Disability Benefits Forum at the end of March.

We are aiming to introduce changes to the test from April 2000.

Pensions

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assumptions he has made on the size of the rebates of those contracting out of SERPS for *(a)* a personal pension and *(b)* a stakeholder pension over the next five decades. [65171]

Mr. Timms: The assumptions used are those set out in the Government Actuary's report "Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes, Review of Certain Contracting-out Terms" (Cm 3888), presented to Parliament in March 1998.

As explained in the Green Paper on pensions, "Partnership in Pensions", the structure of the contracting out rebates will be reviewed in the light of Stakeholder Pension schemes. For the purposes of the estimates in the Green Paper the level of contracting out rebates for Stakeholder Pension schemes and Personal Pensions were assumed to be the same.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many members of the second state pension scheme will gain more in retirement than they earned in work. [64945]

Mr. Timms: Information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

An individual who earned £4,250 per year throughout a full working life of 49 years would receive State Pension payments (basic Retirement Pension and the State Second Pension combined, assuming they do not contract-out) approximately equal to their gross earnings in the year before they reach state pension age. Any individual earning below this level in every year (but above the Lower Earnings Limit—£3,328 in 1998–99) would receive State Pension payments higher than their earnings in the year before reaching State pension age.

Note:

Assumed real earnings growth is 1.5 per cent per year.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the choice of the single nominated stakeholder pension scheme for whom employers will be compelled to pass employee contributions will be determined by a vote of all employees in the firm wishing to join a stakeholder pension scheme. [64819]

Mr. Timms: We proposed in the Green Paper on pensions, "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions", that employers should be required to consult their workforce or any organisations representing them before nominating a stakeholder pension scheme. The form this consultation takes will, however, be a matter for individual employers to decide.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of personal pension holders who will transfer to stakeholder pensions; and if he will present this figure as a proportion of all personal pension holders. [64951]

Mr. Timms: The Green Paper on pensions, "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions", makes clear that the decision to transfer from a personal pension to a stakeholder pension scheme will depend on individual circumstances, including the terms on which a transfer is offered. It is not possible to predict how many personal pension holders will in practice choose to transfer.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to bring forward proposals to help pensioners with incomes just above the income support level; and how many pensioners will be helped by such measures. [64947]

Mr. Timms: We said in the pensions Green Paper that we would welcome views on the most cost effective ways of reforming the rules governing the minimum income guarantee so as to better reward those who have saved for their retirement. We hope to bring forward proposals later in this Parliament. Any changes will depend upon the resources available. The numbers of pensioners affected will depend on the measures proposed.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the minimum payment under the state's second pension once the scheme becomes fully operative. [64944]

Mr. Timms: An individual who worked for a full working life of 49 years from April 2002, earning above the Lower Earnings Limit (LEL) in every year (£3,328 in 1998/99), would receive a State Second Pension as described on page 45 of "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions" of approximately £51 per week, in today's earnings.

This is the minimum amount payable to any individual who spends a full working life in employment (earning above the LEL), or who qualifies for caring or disability credits, under the State Second Pension scheme.

Notes:

1. Assumed real earnings growth is 1.5 per cent. per year.

2. The estimate is given in constant earnings terms i.e. the amount received will be comparable to today's level of average earnings.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate for each of the next five decades the numbers of pensioners who will have incomes above the minimum income guarantee and still remain eligible for income-related benefits. [64950]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is not available.

Projections forward to the year 2050 are subject to a high degree of uncertainty, given the number of assumptions that need to be made in making these estimates. Some of those who will be pensioners in 2050 have yet to begin work, and most are today in their 20s and 30s.

Estimates of the number of pensioners receiving the minimum income guarantee have been made by extrapolating estimates from the PENSIM model, but these can give only a broad indication of the likely order of magnitude of figures so far into the future. The PENSIM projections can be applied only to estimates of pensioners on the minimum income guarantee. Estimates for other income related benefits (such as Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) are not available, as projections for these benefits would require many more assumptions to be made and would be surrounded by an unacceptable level of uncertainty.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in what ways, other than its link to earnings rather than prices, the new minimum income guarantee will differ from income support for pensioners. [64938]

Mr. Timms: We have made it clear that we want to make delivery of the minimum income guarantee more automatic than has been the case with Income Support. To that end, we plan a number of improvements to the way we deliver services to pensioners. In addition we will examine how we might reform the rules to reward better those who have saved for their retirement.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects those people whom he has forecast to benefit from the proposed stakeholder pension scheme to receive those benefits. [64850]

Mr. Timms: The Green Paper on pensions; "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions", indicates that our aim is for the first stakeholder pension schemes to operate from April 2001. People joining a stakeholder pension scheme will begin to receive benefits when they retire.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to bring forward the reforms outlined in paragraph 20 of the fifth Chapter of "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions. [64946]

Mr. Timms: We have already started to improve services for pensioners and expect to continue to do so during the remainder of this Parliament.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people earning between £9,000 and £20,000 are contributing to a pension above the compulsory minimum; and what is the distribution of these sums measuring the value of pension savings per annum in blocks of £250. [64970]

Mr. Timms: Information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows: Data drawn from the 1996 General Household Survey and Spring 1998 Labour Force Survey suggests that there are approximately 10.75 million employees and self-employed people earning between £9,000 and £20,000 per year. Of these, around 7 million are estimated to be making pension savings above the compulsory minimum.

Industrial Deafness

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what specific areas relating to industrial deafness the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council is reviewing; what progress is being made; and what other possible areas of industrial disease are being considered at present by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council. [64974]

Mr. Timms: The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council is undertaking a review of the whole schedule of occupational diseases for which Industrial Injuries benefits are paid, except for a few diseases that they have recently examined. Their aim is to update and simplify the list of diseases, to ensure that they reflect current scientific knowledge.

The Council has set up a dedicated sub-group—the Occupational Deafness Working Group to examine occupational deafness. This is to examine all the criteria for awarding benefit for occupational deafness. The group issued a consultation paper in August 1998 to obtain views on the jobs included for benefit purposes.

When they have finished their consideration, the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council will report their conclusions and recommendations to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Due to the number of prescribed diseases, there is likely to be more than one report. The timing of the Council's report is a matter for them.

Unclaimed Benefits

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will estimate the amounts of unclaimed benefits in each Welsh constituency for each of the following *(a)* income support by (i) pensioners and (ii) non-pensioners, *(b)* housing benefit by (i) local authority and (ii) private tenants, *(c)* council tax benefit by (i) local authority tenants, (ii) private tenants and (iii) owner occupiers, *(d)* family credit by (i) couples and (ii) single parents, *(e)* disability living allowance and *(f)* attendance allowance; [64659]

(2) if he will estimate the amount of unclaimed benefit by *(a)* local authority and *(b)* constituency in Wales in each of the past 10 years. [64655]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available because reliable estimates of unclaimed benefit cannot be produced at this level of detail.

Appeals

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of appeals submitted *(a)* for a paper hearing and *(b)* for an oral hearing to the Independent Tribunal Service were successful in each of the last three years; and in the case of paper hearings, if he will make it a duty of the Tribunal Service (i) to avail itself of the relevant information from the appellant's general practitioner and consultants or (ii) explain to the appellant that he should obtain this information for the tribunal. [64660]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Proportion of oral and paper hearings

		Hearing type	
	All	*Oral*	*Paper*
1997			
All cases heard and decided	22,571	12,577	9,994
Percentage in appellant's favour	30.0	43.6	12.9
1998			
All cases heard and decided	251,321	170,332	80,989
Percentage in appellant's favour	33.9	43.1	14.5

Note:
The figures for 1997 represent a small number of cases due to the introduction of GAPS. Most cases heard and decided during this year (and 1996) were cleared from the old ITS computer system which did not record the oral/paper split. The figures for 1998 contain details of all hearings recorded on GAPS up to the end of October.
Source:
100 per cent. download from the ITS Generic Appeals Processing System (GAPS).

In the case of medical evidence for paper hearings, the Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) explains in a pre-hearing information leaflet sent to appellants that they are responsible for providing reports from general practitioners and consultants before the hearing. However, if further medical evidence is required by the tribunal, it is the tribunal's responsibility to obtain it. The new Appeals Service will give similar information in leaflets for appellants.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in how many cases disability living allowance has been awarded following an appeal to the Independent Tribunal Service *(a)* in respect of the care component of DLA, *(b)* in respect of the mobility component of DLA and *(c)* in respect of both the mobility and care components in the last three years for which figures are available. [65040]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Year[1]	*Care*	*Mobility*	*Care and mobility*
1995–96	9,160	10,540	11,840
1996–97	11,350	12,270	13,700
1997–98	10,660	11,100	13,140

[1] Figures relate to 12 months ending February
Source:
Analytical Services Division: 5 per cent. data

Pensioners (Christmas Bonuses)

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the level of payment of Christmas bonuses to recipients of the state pension in the various member states of the European Union. [65069]

Mr. Timms: Our legislation provides that a £10 Christmas Bonus is payable to people present or ordinarily resident in the United Kingdom or any other member State, who are entitled to receive a qualifying benefit, including State Pension, in the first week in December.

No other European Union member country makes a similar lump sum payment to its pensioners. However, some member states, including Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain make an additional payment equal to the customer's monthly pension in the month of December.

New Deal (Communities)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals his Department has to work with other departments to support the New Deal for Communities. [63206]

Angela Eagle: We are already working with other Government Departments to progress the New Deal for Communities. We are part of the Ministerial network which oversees its development and participate in 10 out of 18 cross-Whitehall Policy Action Teams. Working together we will develop proposals for a long-term, unified strategy to tackle the problems of our poorest neighbourhoods.

HEALTH

Pharmaceutical Packaging

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what preparations his Department has made and what discussions it has held with the pharmaceutical industry to ensure that the European Union directives relating to pharmaceutical packaging which come into force on 1 January 1999 will be implemented in the United Kingdom; and what assessment he has made of the industry's ability to comply with the regulations. [64198]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Numerous discussions have taken place with representatives of the pharmaceutical industry on compliance with Directive 92/27/EEC (on the labelling of medicines for human use and on package leaflets). The most recent meeting was held on 15 December 1998.

The directive requires approval of a package leaflet and labelling when market authorisation is granted or renewed. Authorisation by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) was completed on 1 January 1999.

To facilitate effective compliance with the directive, the MCA recently consulted on proposals to require marketing authorisation holders to provide additional leaflets and labels so as to ensure that an approved label, and, where required, a leaflet would accompany every medicine dispensed to a consumer. This consultation exercise specifically sought details of the impact of these proposals on the pharmaceutical industry. The responses to this exercise are being considered.

Aspirin

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the Medicines Control Agency to decide whether to exempt 75mg strength aspirin from restrictions on pack sizes; and if he will make a statement. [64441]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* A review of the status of 75 milligram aspirin regarding the recent pack size restrictions is currently being co-ordinated by the Medicines Control Agency.

In line with statutory requirements, expert advice is being sought from the Committee on the Safety of Medicines (CSM) and public consultation will follow shortly after. An announcement will be made when the advice of CSM and the Medicines Commission and the responses to the public consultation have been considered.

West Middlesex University Hospital

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will initiate an inquiry into the caseload of the accidents and emergency ward at West Middlesex, with particular reference to the circumstances surrounding the death of a patient in the ward on 6 December. [64931]

Mr. Denham: We do not believe that an inquiry into the caseload of the accident and emergency department at West Middlesex University Hospital National Health Service Trust is warranted. All hospitals face winter pressures of varying degrees and Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow Health Authority have been allocated £2.5 million winter pressures moneys which is being spent on relieving any pressure areas, including opening additional beds when required.

It would not be possible to comment on the circumstances of an individual patient's care without breaking confidentiality. We would wish to extend our sympathies to the family concerned.

Caverject

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to regulate the prescribing of Caverject and MUSE for NHS patients; and if he will make a statement. [65076]

Mr. Denham: We hope shortly to announce substantive policy proposals about the treatment of erectile dysfunction under the National Health Service.

Diabetic Retinopathy

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are *(a)* the proportion of sight disorders attributable to diabetic retinopathy and *(b)* the annual Government expenditure on preventative and treatment facilities designed to alleviate this condition. [64971]

Mr. Hutton: New registrations for blindness in England and Wales (1990–1991) show that, among people of working age (16–64), diabetes is the most common cause of blindness (13.8 per cent.) with 11.9 per cent. of cases of blindness due to diabetic retinopathy. Diabetic retinopathy is also the cause of 8.2 per cent. of registrations for partial sight among this age group. For people over 65, diabetic retinopathy accounts for 2.2 per cent. of new registrations for partial sight.

The condition is treated by regular eye examinations of diabetics and, where there are signs of retinal deterioration, treatment by laser coagulation. Information is not available on the total expenditure on these facilities which span both hospital and community general ophthalmic services.

Age Weighting

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the age weighting in respect of the elderly and its effect on revenue allocations for 1999–2000. [64834]

Mr. Denham: The formula used to inform allocations to health authorities for 1999–2000 comprises three components: hospital and community health services; general practitioner practice infrastructure; and prescribing.

Each component includes an adjustment to reflect the age characteristics of the local population. For each component, the elderly gain a higher weighting than all other age bands.

Consultation Document MLX 249

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to instruct the Medicines Control Agency to extend the consultation period for consultation document MLX 249. [65177]

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will extend the consultation period on the Medicines Control Agency's Document MLX 249; [65259]

(2) what assessment he has made of the length of time available to the public to respond to the Medicines Control Agency's paper MLX 249. [65258]

Ms Jowell: The consultation letter MLX 249 was issued on 6 November asking for responses by 31 December 1998. The period of consultation was within the generally accepted range. Following representations, we have agreed however that responses received by 31 January 1999 will be considered in the normal way.

Allergies

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about his plans to review the services available for the treatment of allergies under the NHS. [65257]

Mr. Hutton: Departmental officials will soon meet representatives of the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology and other relevant professional and patient support bodies to discuss the future of allergy services. The society will be proposing an agenda for this meeting based on their preliminary discussions with the other interested parties.

Also, later this month the Advisory Group on Medical Education and Training, chaired by the Chief Medical Officer, will be considering an application from the Royal College of Physicians' Joint Committee on Higher Medical Training for the recognition of allergy as a clinical specialty in its own right.

WALES

Health Service Expenditure

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his latest estimate is of *(a)* capital and *(b)* current expenditure in Wales in the current financial year on the National Health Service; what the planned figures are for 1999–2000; and what the figures were for actual spending in each of the last three years. [63446]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information is as follows:

£ million

	Outturn:			*Original plan*	
	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Current	2,122.8	2,242.9	2,305.5	2,445.3	—
Capital[1]	55.5	50.1	44.6	34.6	—
Total	2,178.3	2,293.0	2,350.1	2,479.9	2,654.9

[1] Includes capital provision for NHS Trusts within their External Financing Limits. Excludes the estimated cost of depreciation element of NHS Trust expenditure which does not score against the capital account but is included with the health authority revenue.

The split between revenue and capital is not available for 1999–2000 as final spending decisions have not yet been taken.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to the oral answer from the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 306, if he will set out the basis of his calculation for the figures of £1.5 billion to £2 billion to which West Wales and the Valleys could be entitled. [64635]

Mr. Hain: This is our best rough estimate of the level of resources that might be available to Wales for economic investment. It is impossible to be specific about the level that European funding might contribute until the overall EU budget has been set.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations his Department has made to the European Commission regarding economic indicators other than unemployment being used when determining which areas qualify for Objective 2 status. [64749]

Mr. Hain: The UK government, in negotiations on the new Structural Funds programme, have proposed that Objective 2 status be based on a range of indicators which would allow Member States to use their own national and regional criteria to target funds at areas of greatest need. These indicators represent measures of deprivation, the degree of social cohesion, the level and type of unemployment and geographical issues. Negotiations are, however, continuing and the final criteria for Objective 2 status are unlikely to be agreed by Member States before March 1999.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the financial benefits to Wales of economic indicators other than unemployment being used to determine which areas qualify for Objective 2 status. [64750]

Mr. Hain: Specific estimates of the benefits to be made to Wales of certain areas obtaining Objective 2 status have not been made yet. Any benefits depend not only on whether the indicators chosen secure Objective 2 status for any part of Wales, but on the total financial package for the Structural Funds agreed by Member States. Firm estimates will not be possible until Member States have agreed the Agenda 2000 proposals and the associated financial framework.

Holywell High Street

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he signed the traffic order as part of the process of closing and pedestrianising Holywell High Street, Holywell, Flintshire. [64694]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend has made no such order. The Highway Authority for Holywell High Street, part of a non-trunk road, is the appropriate local authority, and, in 1992, the former Clwyd County Council made the County Council of Clwyd (High Street and adjoining roads, Holywell) (Traffic Regulation) Order 1992.

Schools

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on equalising capitation for all schools. [64487]

Mr. Hain: Existing funding arrangements give local education authorities the flexibility to address local needs, circumstances and priorities. I have no plans at the present time to restrict this by introducing measures to equalise capitation.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his policy is on the funding of foundation schools. [64530]

Mr. Hain: Foundation schools in Wales will be funded in accordance with the Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations 1998 which were laid before Parliament on 3 December.

EU Budget

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate Wales's contribution to the EU budget during the next six year period. [64500]

Mr. Hain: It is the UK, as member state, which makes a contribution to the EU budget. Estimates of Wales's contribution would depend on exactly which of many hypothetical assumptions are made about which taxes, at UK level, are deemed to finance the EU contribution, because different taxes have different regional effects.

Higher Education Funding Council

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many of the newly appointed members of the Higher Education Funding Council (Wales) are resident in Wales. [65070]

Mr. Hain: Five re-appointments to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales were announced on 8 December 1998. Two of these re-appointed members, Dr. Brynley Roberts and Professor Brian Clarkson, are resident in Wales.

Of the remainder, Sir Philip Jones, the Chairman, was educated at Cowbridge Grammar School and Dr. Kenneth Gray is a graduate of the University of Wales, Bangor.

Employment

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the numbers in employment in Wales in each year since 1979. [65092]

Mr. Hain: Labour Force Survey estimates of the numbers of people in employment in Wales in each available year since 1979 are shown in the table.

Numbers in employment, Wales, 1979–98

Thousand [1]

Year	*Number in employment*
1979	1,136
1980	[2]—
1981	1,097
1982	[2]—
1983	1,028
1984	1,073
1985	1,076
1986	1,085
1987	1,080
1988	1,135
1989	1,212
1990	1,232
1991	1,202
1992	1,192
1993	1,155
1994	1,177
1995	1,189
1996	1,195
1997	1,216
1998	1,204

[1] Not seasonally adjusted.
[2] Not available.

Notes:
1. Employment at spring each year.
2. Data are not available for 1980 and 1982 as the Labour Force Survey was carried out every two years between 1973 and 1983.
3. Numbers in employment include people aged 16 or over who did some paid work in the reference week (whether as employees or self employed), those who had a job they were temporarily away from, people on government employment and training programmes (from spring 1983), and unpaid family workers (from spring 1992). People in full-time education who also did some paid work in the reference week have been classified as in employment since spring 1983.

Source:
Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey.

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the number of *(a)* manufacturing and *(b)* service jobs created in Wales since May 1997; and how many jobs have been lost in the same period. [65091]

Mr. Hain: According to the Welsh Register of Manufacturing Employment (WRME) there have been an estimated 15,400 jobs gained and 17,600 jobs lost in manufacturing in Wales since June 1997. These figures relate to manufacturing plants which employed 11 or more people.

Corresponding data for service jobs are not available.

National Vocational Qualifications

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate his Department has made of the

number of 16 and 17 year olds who are *(a)* in employment and *(b)* unemployed but have not qualified to NVQ level 2. [64746]

Mr. Hain: Estimates derived from the Labour Force Survey, for summer 1998, indicate that of the 34,000 16 and 17 year olds in employment, about 13,000 were not qualified to NVQ level 2 or equivalent. Figures on the numbers of unemployed 16 and 17 year olds not qualified to NVQ level 2 or equivalent cannot be reliably estimated.

Investing in Young People

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the financing of the Government's Investing in Young People strategy. [64747]

Mr. Hain: Investing in Young People is a term used by the Department for Education and Employment to describe a range of education and training initiatives in England, which are designed to raise the achievements of young people to NVQ level 2 or equivalent. This term is not used within Wales, although most of the initiatives are contained within our policies which are set out in "Building Better Schools Together, Learning is for Everyone" and "Pathway to Prosperity: A New Economic Agenda for Wales".

High-quality education and training which is accessible to all is essential to building a prosperous Welsh economy. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales announced on 14 December 1998 *Official Report*, column *3*, that he was increasing total expenditure on education and training in Wales by £844 million over the next 3 years. This increase will provide a sound basis for the National Assembly for Wales when it assumes responsibility for education and training in Wales.

Expenditure on Skill-Seekers and Skill-Build, our replacement programmes for Youth Training, is being increased by £9 million in 1999–2000, and by £12 million and £13.5 million respectively in 2000–01 and 2001–02. This will allow TECs to:

- maintain the current level of places for Modern Apprenticeships, National Traineeships and Skill-Build, a programme targeted at those young people who are not able to follow training to level 2;
- increase the basic level of training allowance to £40 per week;
- improve the quality of provision through the payment of higher unit prices to training providers.

In order to help 14 and 15 year old young people who have been, or are at risk of being, excluded from education, and 16 to 17 year olds who have dropped out of education, training and employment, we are making available a further £0.4 million in 1999–2000, and £0.9 million in 2000–01 and 2001–02 to strengthen the Youth Access Initiative.

To help ensure that young people leaving school embark upon the most appropriate training or education pathway, we have asked the Welsh TECs to collaborate with the careers companies to design and operation, on a pilot basis, a Youth Gateway. The Youth Gateway comprises an extended assessment, work sampling initiative which will enable young people to make better-informed decisions about their future. £3.75 million is being made available over three years for this purpose.

We will also be introducing in September 1999 the new statutory Right to Time Off to Study or Train programme. Targeting 16 and 17 year olds who are already in jobs but have not achieved a level 2 qualification, this programme will allow them reasonable paid time off work, to pursue a course of study or training leading to the achievement of a level 2 qualification.

Our policies for further education (FE) are detailed in our lifelong learning Green Paper—"Learning is for Everyone" (LIFE).

LIFE sets out a challenging vision of priorities for the future and in order to meet this challenge I was delighted to announce last month very significant increases in funding for further education. In 1999–2000, total expenditure on FE in Wales will for the first time exceed £200 million with more than £100 million of additional funding being ploughed into the sector over the next three years. This will support additional student enrolments of 28,000 by academic year 2001–2002, on top of the current 202,000 enrolments. Also, FE Access Funds will increase from £0.5 million per annum to a total of £13 million over the next three years, to support widening access and improved retention of students.

These new and enhanced programmes demonstrate the commitment of the Government to investing in the young people of Wales.

Welfare Rights

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will list the counties that have independent welfare rights organisations; [64652]

(2) if he will list the counties in Wales that operate welfare rights units; [64654]

(3) if he will estimate the amount of public funds spent per 1,000 of population on welfare rights services for each local authority in Wales. [64656]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information requested is not held centrally.

Water Pollution

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to announce the outcome of the review of the adequacy of preventive controls over water pollution from oil and petrol storage installations in Wales. [64933]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Groundwater Regulations 1998 (SI 1998, No. 2746), which I signed in November 1998, will give the Environment Agency additional new powers to help it prevent leaks and spillages from storage facilities, including from underground fuel storage at retail petrol stations. The Government are considering whether further controls to prevent water pollution from oil and petrol storage installations are needed and we expect to make an announcement about our conclusions later this year.

Homelessness

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assistance he plans to provide to homeless people in Wales over winter. [64804]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Last month, local authorities, working with the voluntary sector, were invited to submit bids for grants to provide further assistance to rough sleepers over the winter. Fourteen applications have been received and I will write to my hon. Friend shortly with details of successful bids and place a copy in the Library. During the current year, the Welsh Office has also allocated £350,000 for rough sleeping projects and £315,000 towards the running costs of 3 organisations concerned with preventing and alleviating homelessness.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Special Advisers

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62839]

Mr. Robin Cook: David Clark and Andrew Hood are currently employed as Special Advisers in my Department. They are employed under terms and conditions based on the Model Contract for Special Advisers, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House.

David Clark is advising me on European Affairs and Security Policy.

Andrew Hood is advising me on policy related to Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, Asia, international trade policy, human rights, the global environment, the arms trade and the Commonwealth.

Both work in accordance with Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the Model Contract.

Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements. Both Mr. Clark and Mr. Hood have been cleared to the same level as senior FCO officials.

MI6

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *167*, concerning MI6 personnel taking up private sector posts, how many cases have been *(a)* referred to the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments and *(b)* subject to consideration by himself; and of those he has considered, how many he has (i) approved, (ii) rejected and (iii) deferred. [63856]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Since 1 May 1997 the case of one retiring SIS officer has been referred to the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, and another to the Cabinet Secretary. In both cases, recommendations were subsequently put to me to confirm approval, which I did.

Cyprus (Landmines)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of active landmines which are buried in the *(a)* Republic of Cyprus and *(b)* occupied area of Northern Cyprus. [64296]

Ms Quin: A UN Mine Action Service paper of November 1998 reported an estimated total of 16,942 landmines in Cyprus. In June 1998 the UN Secretary-General's report on the United Nations operation in Cyprus stated that there are 38 minefields and booby-trapped areas inside the UN buffer zone and a further 73 within 500m of it. It confirmed that UNFICYP continues to seek precise information about minefields from both sides.

Telephone Records

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *167–68*, if the telephone system in his Department has the capability to record external numbers dialled from particular telephone extensions. [64516]

Mr. Fatchett: We are in the process of acquiring, from CCTA, call logging equipment which will enable calls to be identified.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka last visited the Jaffna area; whom he met; and what report he has submitted on his discussions and views regarding that meeting. [64522]

Mr. Fatchett: Our High Commissioner last visited Jaffna on 20 and 21 August 1998. This was his third visit since 1996. Other officials from the High Commission have also made regular visits.

The High Commissioner met the Government Agent, the Vicar General, the Acting Vice Chancellor of the University, members of the aid community, the Headmistress of a girl's school, and the Major and Municipal councillors.

His report highlighted a number of areas where Britain might be able to offer some development assistance. These are being pursued.

He also gave a short speech at the Municipal Council office when he observed that there had been much progress in the development of Jaffna since his first visit and appealed to Tamil communities outside Sri Lanka to contribute to the reconstruction of Jaffna.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made to the Government of Sri Lanka regarding a resolution of the continuing conflict with the Tamil community; and if he will make a statement. [65066]

Mr. Fatchett: We believe a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka can be reached only through a political settlement. During my visit to Colombo in November last year I made clear to the Sri Lankan Government that we remain ready to help in the resolution of the conflict if both sides ask us to play a role.

Iraq (Missing Kuwaitis)

Mr. Curry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he has taken to support Kuwait in pressing for the return home of Kuwaiti *(a)* missing persons and *(b)* prisoners of war, or of their remains, from Iraq following the Gulf conflict. [64583]

Mr. Fatchett: We continue to play a leading role in the Tripartite Commission and Technical Sub-Committee meetings which work to resolve the cases of the 600 or more Kuwaitis missing since the Gulf War. We fully support the International Committee of the Red Cross which chairs these meetings in its attempts to seek the truth about the whereabouts of the missing. We have seen reports that Iraq has postponed indefinitely its participation in the Technical Sub-Committee meetings. We are discussing this further with the ICRC. We are concerned at this sign of a new level of Iraqi non-cooperation on the issue. It is appalling that Iraq has done so little to date to account for the Kuwaiti missing.

Arms Transfers

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will take measures to ensure that *(a)* all arms transfers require legally binding end-use certification, *(b)* British embassies are required to check end-user documentation relating to the recipient country and *(c)* details of end-users relating to the granting or refusal of export licences are included in annual reports of strategic exports to Parliament. [64535]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: All applications for Standard Individual Export Licences to export goods controlled for strategic reasons must be supported by appropriate End-User Undertakings, or, if the consignee is a government body, a copy of the relevant part of the official purchase order or contract. It would not be possible to make End-User Undertakings binding on the end-user or consignee in UK law without the assumption of extra-territorial powers by the Government.

We regularly ask our overseas posts to carry out checks in cases where we wish to confirm the accuracy of the information contained in end-user documentation.

On the content of the forthcoming annual report on strategic exports, I refer my hon. Friend to my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *149*. Information on licences issued and refused will be broken down by country but will not include details of individual end-users.

British Council

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the good governance work of the British Council and its contribution to an ethical dimension in foreign policy. [65183]

Mr. Fatchett: The promotion of good government worldwide is a priority for the Government and a central feature in building an ethical dimension in foreign policy. The British Council makes a valuable contribution to this policy in its work overseas in areas such as the promotion of democratic institutions and procedures, the reform of public sector institutions, the role of the media, legal systems and conflict resolution.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the *(a)* extent and *(b)* impact of reductions in the Government grant to the British Council between 1979 and 1996. [65185]

Mr. Fatchett: From 1979 the British Council's grant-in-aid fluctuated considerably with reductions in 1979–80, 1980–81, 1986–87 and 1992–93. The most recent reduction was in 1996–97 when the grant-in-aid decreased by 6 per cent. in real terms. As a result the Council reduced its headquarters staff by 26 per cent., relocated its Manchester office and restructured overseas directorates. In spite of these fluctuations, the Council expanded its overseas network from 70 countries in 1979 to 109 in 1996 in response to changes in the international environment and the opportunities these opened up.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what information he has on the progress being made by the British Council in appointing a new Director-General. [65184]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Council has received a good response to its recruitment campaign for a new Director General. The Nomination Sub-Committee of the Board of the British Council expects to draw up a short list of candidates this month and to conduct final interviews in February. Given normal notice periods the Council hopes to have a new Director General in place by June.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the benefit to Britain of the English language teaching and promotion undertaken by the British Council. [65186]

Mr. Fatchett: The FCO's annual survey of the work of the British Council demonstrates that the Council's English language work is making an increasingly important contribution to the objectives of British missions abroad. This work increases respect for British values and creates export opportunities for the UK, while being welcomed by host countries as a valued contribution to their communities.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his plans for the British Council over the next five years. [65182]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Council, as the UK's principal agency for cultural relations overseas, will continue to contribute to the achievement of the Government's foreign policy objectives for the foreseeable future. Working in close consultation with the FCO and through its skill and expertise, it will provide essential support to our overall diplomatic effort.

Chechnya

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those UK companies known to be operating in Chechnya during 1998 with the goods and services which they have supplied to Chechnya. [64796]

Ms Quin: The only British company which we know to have operated in Chechnya during 1998 is Granger Telecom. We understand that this company was working on a local and satellite communications project in Grozny. The exact details are a matter for the company.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library copies of the written communications between Granger Telecom and his Department during 1998. [64794]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: In agreement with Granger Telecom, I have placed in the Library copies of the two written communications between the FCO and the company before the tragic kidnap of 3 October 1998. I am also placing in the Library a copy of my letter of 11 December and 8 January to the hon. Member, which set these communications in context.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department was first informed of activities by Granger Telecom in Chechnya. [64795]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: In July 1998: Granger Telecom wrote to HM Ambassador, Moscow, on 9 July 1998 supporting visa applications for the UK by Chechens associated with Granger Telecom's activities in Chechnya.

Committee on Human Rights

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to set up a Committee on Human Rights to investigate human rights abuses abroad. [65003]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have no immediate plans to set up a Committee on Human Rights. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office receives full information on human rights violations abroad, including from UK official sources diplomatic reporting, international organisations and from non-governmental organisations, academic institutions and the media, including the BBC Monitoring Service from Caversham. The FCO also receives relevant human rights reports by other governments, including the State Department's Annual Report. All this information is routinely available to all FCO officials.

Notes and Memoranda

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the series of notes and memoranda which are produced by the research analysts and economic advisers departments. [65080]

Mr. Fatchett: These papers cover politically and economically sensitive subjects and are not produced for use outside of government. Each note or memorandum is added to the public record and made available when no longer sensitive, in classes FO 972–3 at the Public Record Office, Kew.

Arms Sales

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to incorporate the EU Code of Conduct on arms sales into UK law. [64708]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: EU Member States adopted the Code of Conduct on Arms Exports as a political commitment rather than as a Joint Action or Common Position, which would have been legally binding. It would not therefore be appropriate to incorporate the Code of Conduct in UK law, especially as our national arms export licensing criteria, which are similar to those in the Code of Conduct, are not thus incorporated.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to publish detailed annual reports on arms exports; and if he will make a statement. [64709]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: As to the content of the Government's first annual report on the UK's strategic export controls, I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 14 July 1998 to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), *Official Report*, column *149*. As to the timing of publication, I refer the hon. Member to my reply to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on 27 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 38.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Operation Angel

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the cost was to his Department of its contributions towards Operation Angel in North West England; [64509]

(2) what the total cost was of Operation Angel in the North West of England to *(a)* the Government and *(b)* public bodies financed through the council tax. [64508]

Mr. Boateng: Operation Angel was the name given to an investigation by Lancashire Constabulary into allegations of public sector corruption in the Preston area. The cost of the investigation was borne by the Lancashire Constabulary from within its normal budget. My Department has not incurred any direct costs for the investigation. Information on costs falling to other Departments or public bodies financed through the council tax is not collected by the Home Office.

CS Sprays

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which UK police forces have had CS gas issued to them since 1968. [63929]

Mr. Boateng: All police forces in England and Wales have issued their officers with CS incapacitant spray except Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Sussex. An operational pilot has recently been completed in two forces in Scotland: Strathclyde and Tayside. CS incapacitant spray is not issued in Northern Ireland.

CS dispersed in smoke for use in situations of public disorder has been available to all police forces since 1968 for use as a tactical option. It is a matter for individual chief officers of police to decide whether to hold CS for this purpose.

Solsr Eclipse

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assistance the Government will offer to Cornwall in dealing with problems arising from the total eclipse of the sun on 11 August 1999. [65033]

Mr. George Howarth: The Home Office is responsible for emergency planning in England and Wales and makes an annual grant to county level local authorities to make plans for emergencies. This grant complements the local authority's own commitment.

Under Integrated Emergency Management arrangements, local emergency planners develop non-specific and flexible plans designed to produce a multi-agency response to the effects of an incident irrespective of the cause. This approach is ideal for an incident such as the Eclipse which is not an unforeseen emergency, but is an event for which there has been sufficient time for local services to plan. There are arrangements to seek mutual aid, if required, from services in other areas and ultimately from the military.

My officials have been involved in discussions with those responsible for planning the response to the Eclipse, including the Chief Executive of Cornwall County Council and the Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall Constabulary and will continue to watch developments closely offering assistance where possible.

Private Security Firms

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration has been given to introducing an independent licensing authority and regulatory framework for private security firms. [64538]

Mr. Boateng: We intend to introduce statutory regulation for the private security industry as soon as possible. We will not be able to bring forward early legislation, as we warned before the election, but we completed a consultation exercise with the industry and others last year on the best way to provide a comprehensive, effective and streamlined system. We are determined to develop practical proposals which protect the safety and rights of the public without introducing unnecessary bureaucracy. We hope to bring forward firm proposals shortly.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what role private security firms will undertake as part of Crime and Disorder Act 1998 partnerships; and if he will make a statement. [64539]

Mr. Boateng: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 does not specifically provide a role for the private security industry. However, the requirement for local authorities and police in every area to produce strategies to reduce crime and disorder gives all members of the community—including the private security industry—the opportunity to make a contribution to the development and implementation of those strategies.

Young Offenders

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Government have taken to enable the youth justice system to prevent offending by children and young persons. [64537]

Mr. Boateng: Measures to enable the youth justice system to prevent offending by children and young persons are contained in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; others are within the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill currently before Parliament.

The Crime and Disorder Act introduces the final warning scheme in place of repeat cautioning of young offenders; new community-based court disposals to prevent or address youth offending and its causes; and multi-agency youth offending teams to turn young offenders away from crime. These measures are being piloted in ten areas of the country ahead of national implementation. The Act also contains measures to speed up the youth justice system and establishes the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales to monitor the operation of the system and provide advice on how the aim of preventing offending might most effectively be achieved.

The Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill will create a new form of sentencing disposal for first time defendants in the youth court who plead guilty. Except in cases in which the court decides that an absolute discharge or a custodial sentence would be more appropriate, there will be a referral to a youth offender panel, which will draw up a contract with the offender, aimed at tackling his or her offending behaviour and its causes.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost to East Sussex County Council of maintaining illegal immigrants who arrived at Newhaven Ferry Port in each of the last three years. [64755]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the question from the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *747*.

Asylum and Immigration

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if asylum seekers who applied between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995 and who have convictions for offences resulting in a sentence of *(a)* imprisonment of less than 12 months and *(b)* a community service order will be eligible for the process of determining asylum applications set out in paragraph 8.30 of "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum"; [64685]

(2) what plans he has for the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to ascertain which asylum seekers whose applications were made before 31 December 1995 have convictions for offences resulting in a sentence of *(a)* imprisonment of less than 12 months and *(b)* a community service order. [64687]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Under the procedure set out in para. 8.30 of the White Paper CM4018, every undecided application for asylum made between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995 will be examined individually to see whether the applicant qualifies for asylum or for leave to remain on some other ground, both in relation to the usual criteria and in relation to the presence of factors associated with the delay in deciding the case. Where there is information suggesting that the applicant's presence in the United Kingdom would not be conducive to the public good, including any information about criminal convictions, this will be taken into account when considering the application.

The arrangements by which the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) is notified of criminal convictions and recommendations for deportation made by a court are those set out in the answer I gave to the hon. Member on 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *117*. Officials are examining these arrangements to consider whether IND should routinely be notified where someone subject to immigration control is convicted of an offence resulting in a sentence of

imprisonment of less than 12 months or a community service order. I have asked them to report their conclusions in due course.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the individuals and organisations that responded to the White Paper on Asylum and Immigration; and, for those who did not indicate that they did not wish their submissions to be published, when he intends to make those responses available. [65073]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 726.

Fire and Rescue Services

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* per capital funding and *(b)* the standard spending assessment for each local authority's fire and rescue services in 1999–2000. [64846]

Mr. George Howarth: The following table sets out the provisional fire standard spending assessment for 1999–2000 and the amount per head of population for local authorities responsible for fire service funding. Some of these are constituent authorities of combined fire authorities. For example, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, together with the continuing part of Staffordshire County Council, form a combined fire authority for the former county of Staffordshire.

Table showing provisional 1999–2000 fire standard spending assessments for English authorities

Local authority	*Fire SSA (£/head)*	*Fire SSA £ million*
England	27	1,346.000
London area	38	270.534
Metropolitan areas	31	342.853
Shire areas	24	732.303
Isles of Scilly	158	0.310
London Fire	38	270.534
Greater Manchester Fire	31	78.835
Merseyside Fire	37	51.827
South Yorkshire Fire	27	35.684
Tyne and Wear Fire	33	36.870
West Midlands Fire	30	78.365
West Yorkshire Fire	29	61.273
Metropolitan fire authorities	31	342.853
Shire counties	23	534.574
Shire unitary authorities	24	197.729
Isle of Wight Council	28	3.584
All purpose authorities		
Bath and North East Somerset	28	4.693
Blackburn with Darwen	24	3.314
Blackpool	26	3.902
Bournemouth	22	3.499
Bracknell Forest	23	2.541
Brighton and Hove	25	6.218
Bristol	23	9.410
Darlington	26	2.645
Derby	22	5.247
East Riding of Yorkshire	33	10.221
Halton	19	2.313
Hartlepool	37	3.425
Herefordshire	21	3.553
Isle of Wight Council	28	3.584
Kingston upon Hull	25	6.666
Leicester	18	5.275
Luton	20	3.564
Medway	21	5.130
Middlesbrough	37	5.337
Milton Keynes	19	3.782
North East Lincolnshire	28	4.439
North Lincolnshire	29	4.436
North Somerset	28	5.133
Nottingham	21	5.891
Peterborough	20	3.188
Plymouth	20	5.116
Poole	22	3.173
Portsmouth	19	3.568
Reading	20	2.980
Redcar and Cleveland	41	5.680
Rutland	25	0.896
Slough	21	2.319
South Gloucestershire	26	6.192
Southampton	18	3.906
Southend-on-Sea	22	3.825
Stockton-on-Tees	40	7.204
Stoke-on-Trent	18	4.573
Swindon	18	3.255
Telford and the Wrekin	18	2.677
Thurrock	22	2.972
Torbay	26	3.134
Warrington	22	4.141
West Berkshire	24	3.472
Windsor and Maidenhead	27	3.826
Wokingham	26	3.747
York	21	3.666
Isles of Scilly	158	0.310
Shire Counties		
Bedfordshire	24	9.006
Buckinghamshire	23	11.062
Cambridgeshire	22	12.423
Cheshire	24	16.255
Cornwall	26	12.440
Cumbria	26	12.667
Derbyshire	26	18.665
Devon	26	18.059
Dorset	24	9.201
Durham	25	12.478
East Sussex	27	13.304
Essex	24	31.499
Gloucestershire	21	11.624
Hampshire	24	29.163
Hertfordshire	23	23.676
Kent	24	31.418
Lancashire	28	31.570
Leicestershire	24	14.540
Lincolnshire	20	12.097
Norfolk	21	16.176
North Yorkshire	22	12.561
Northamptonshire	21	13.083
Northumberland	28	8.506
Nottinghamshire	26	19.013
Oxfordshire	22	13.548
Shropshire	21	5.801
Somerset	21	10.213
Staffordshire	22	17.895
Suffolk	20	13.450
Surrey	24	25.278
Warwickshire	22	11.295
West Sussex	23	17.201
Wiltshire	20	8.551
Worcestershire	20	10.858

Speed Cameras (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many speed cameras have been installed in Gloucestershire; and how many prosecutions resulted from them in each of the last five years for which records are available. [64817]

Mr. Boateng: I understand from the Chief Constable of Gloucestershire Constabulary that the force has 33 sites for automatic speed cameras and that the cameras were first brought into use during 1995. There were 526 prosecutions in 1995 and 3,705 in 1996. Figures for 1997 are not yet available.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *214*, if the average cost of flights, with reference to flights by Ministers in his Department, refers to the average cost per passenger. [64720]

Mr. Straw: The average cost refers to the average cost per trip and not the average cost per passenger.

Liquor Licensing

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* late licensed premises and *(b)* licensed premises there are per 1,000 head of population for each county in Wales. [64653]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of *(a)* special hours certificates and *(b)* licensed premises per 1,000 persons for each county in Wales as at 30 June 1998 is given in the table.

	Special hours certificates per 1,000 population	*Licensed premises per 1,000 population*
Clwyd	0.14	3.09
Dyfed	0.19	5.36
Gwent	0.12	2.87
Gwynedd	0.21	7.86
Powys	0.08	6.17
Mid-Glamorgan	0.21	2.57
South Glamorgan	0.31	2.57
West Glamorgan	0.31	2.92

Note:
Counties are those before the recent reorganisation of local government in Wales

Unclassified Papers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a list of unclassified papers produced in the made available series of papers by the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate since January 1997, specifying the title of each paper and the date on which it was produced. [65060]

Mr. Boateng: The information is as follows:

Name	*Date produced*
Voluntary After-Care	1997
Options for improved support for victims and other witnesses attending Magistrates' courts	May 1997
The processing of Rape Cases by the Criminal Justice System	November 1997
The effects of Video violence on Young Offenders	1998
Trends in Crime Revisited	1998
Reconviction after sentence: a six year follow up of people sentenced in the Crown Court in 1996	January 1998
A Survey of Custody Officers' Views on New Provisions of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994	March 1998
The Impact of the National Lottery on the Horserace Betting Levy: Technical Supplement	July 1998
The Impact of the National Lottery on the Horserace Betting Levy: Third Report	July 1998
Evolving Crack Cocaine Careers, New User, Quitters and Long Term Combination Drug Users in North West England	September 1998
Transfers from prison to hospital: the Operation of Section 48 of the Mental Health Act 1983	October 1998

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a list of unclassified papers produced in the Briefing Notes series of papers by the Police and Reducing Crime Unit since January 1997, specifying the title of each paper and the date on which it was produced. [65059]

Mr. Boateng: All main series reports produced by the Home Office Policing and Reducing Crime Unit are circulated with a short briefing note summarising the main findings and points for action. Occasionally, the Unit prepares a stand alone briefing note which may be an extended summary of a piece of work which we do not justify a full report, or as an interim report on a project which is attracting interest. There have been two publications in this Briefing Note series since January 1997:

1/98 Domestic Violence and Repeat Victimisation (August 1998)

2/98 Planning Police Trainee Throughput: some good practice suggestions (August 1998).

Papers published in the Briefing Note series are included in the Unit's general publications list, which is published on the World Wide Internet and is also freely available from the Unit. An up-to-date list will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Sandeep Bansall

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning the prison placement of Mr. Sandeep Bansall. [65178]

Mr. George Howarth: The hon. Member wrote to my noble Friend, the Lord Williams of Mostyn, the Minister with responsibility for prisons and probation, and made representations over the telephone to the Director General of the Prison Service, requesting Mr. Bansal's transfer from Pentonville prison.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when Mr. Sandeep Bansall will be moved from Pentonville prison; [65180]

(2) what steps have been taken by the prison authorities to place Mr. Sandeep Bansall nearer his family. [65179]

Mr. George Howarth: Mr. Sandeep Bansall was temporarily transferred on 22 December 1998 from Pentonville prison to Leicester prison. As this is a local prison, whose primary purpose is to serve the courts, he was then allocated to Ashwell, a training prison near Leicester, and moved there on 30 December 1998.

Pigmeat Imports

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of the pigmeat imported from outside the United Kingdom which was purchased for consumption in prisons in each of the last three years. [65118]

Mr. George Howarth: Up to and including 31 March 1998, all pigmeat consumed in prisons in England and Wales was produced by the Prison Service's own farms. Since that date, all pigmeat has been purchased on contract.

The contractors have advised that all pork supplied to the Prison Service has been of British origin, as has 80 per cent. of the bacon. The remaining 20 per cent. of bacon was imported, primarily from Holland, and cost approximately £60,000.

Education Expenditure

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of section 11 funding was spent in each education authority area in England and Wales in 1997–98; and what percentage of pupils were covered by the grant in each case. [63694]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The table relates to the maximum grant payable to each local education authority (LEA) in respect of the 1997–98 financial year, expressed as a percentage of the total maximum grant payable to LEAs. The figures refer to projects for various educational purposes, in schools and in other sectors. The types of project vary between authorities.

Information is not held centrally in the form requested in the second part of my hon. Friend's Question. Reports are received annually on each project, showing the numbers of pupils, or others, covered. But, because support provided to an individual may be separately counted under different headings, aggregation of the figures may produce a misleading result.

LEA	*Percentage*
Barking & Dagenham	0.34
Barnet	1.03
Bedfordshire	0.82
Berkshire	1.08
Bexley	0.15
Birmingham	4.35
Bolton	0.76
Bradford	4.73
Brent	1.47
Brighton & Hove	0.15
Bristol[1]	0.70
Bromley	0.03
Buckinghamshire[2]	1.16
Bury	0.39
Calderdale	0.93
Cambridgeshire	1.16
Camden	1.82
Cardiff	0.45
Cheshire	0.09
Coventry	2.57
Croydon	1.52
Darlington[3]	0.15
Derby[4]	1.41
Devon	0.08
Doncaster	0.11
Dudley	1.02
Ealing	1.51
East Sussex	0.09
Enfield	1.71
Essex	0.03
Gateshead	0.03
Gloucestershire	0.27
Greenwich	1.11
Hackney	2.92
Hammersmith & Fulham	0.55
Hampshire	0.13
Haringey	2.70
Harrow	0.69
Havering	0.05
Hereford & Worcester	0.23
Hertfordshire	1.79
Hillingdon	0.41
Hounslow	1.36
Hull[5]	0.04
Islington	1.57
Kensington & Chelsea	0.94
Kent	1.28
Kingston	0.11
Kirklees	2.57
Lambeth	2.10
Lancashire	5.02
Leeds	0.96
Leicester	2.63
Leicestershire	0.51
Lewisham	1.37
Lincolnshire	0.09
Liverpool	0.30
Luton	1.78
Manchester	2.40
Merton	0.65
Middlesbrough[6]	0.55
Newcastle	0.05
Newham	0.12
Newport	0.31
Norfolk	0.16
North East Lincolnshire	0.04
North Lincolnshire	0.23
North Tyneside	0.13
North Yorkshire[7]	0.06
Northamptonshire	0.58
Nottinghamshire	1.58
Oldham	1.96
Oxfordshire	0.56
Poole[8]	0.03
Portsmouth	0.18
Redbridge	1.24
Richmond	0.06
Rochdale	1.20
Rotherham	0.39
Salford	0.06
Sheffield	1.51
Shropshire	0.12
Somerset	0.05
South Tyneside	0.13
Southampton	0.39
Southwark	0.82
St Helens	0.02
Staffordshire[9]	0.89
Stockport	0.09
Suffolk	0.28

LEA	Percentage
Sunderland	0.10
Surrey	0.33
Sutton	0.09
Swansea	0.32
Swindon[10]	0.14
Tameside	0.43
Tower Hamlets	6.61
Trafford	0.34
Wakefield	0.29
Walsall	1.46
Waltham Forest	1.66
Wandsworth	1.46
Warwickshire	0.98
West Sussex	0.25
Westminster	1.74
Wigan	0.08
Wolverhampton	1.55

The following show the *estimated* approximate division of the grant allocated to the lead authority among the LEAs in question:

[1] Bristol: 93%. Bath & North Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire: 7%.

[2] Buckinghamshire: 80%. Milton Keynes: 20%.

[3] Darlington: 60%. Durham: 40%.

[4] Derby City: 95%. Derbyshire: 5%.

[5] Hull: 80%. East Riding of Yorkshire: 20%.

[6] Middlesbrough: 63%. Stockton: 27%. Redcar and Cleveland, and Hartlepool: 10%.

[7] North Yorkshire: 34%. City of York: 66%.

[8] Poole, Bournemouth and Dorset: about one third each.

[9] Staffordshire: 40%. Stoke-on-Trent: 60%.

[10] Swindon: 60%. Wiltshire: 40%.

Note:

In a number of cases, local education authorities had entered into agreements with neighbouring LEAs to act as the "lead authority" in a joint arrangement for administrative purposes. In these, grant allocations were made to the lead authority, which would distribute funding to each LEA.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in the Cabinet Office since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising, *(c)* direct mail and *(d)* publicity. [64186]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* Since May 1997 the Cabinet Office expenditure on public opinion research totalled £481,200; on television, radio and newspaper advertising £220,164; on direct mail £794,319, and on publicity £1,158,469. All figures are net of recoverable VAT.

Civil Servants (Industrial Tribunals)

Mr. Prior: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which civil servants are not allowed to use the Industrial Tribunal Service as a last means of settling disputes. [64338]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* The only civil servants who do not have access to an Employment Tribunal are those employed as police constables in the Ministry of Defence Police. In common with other persons in police service, their rights to bring proceedings in an Employment Tribunal are restricted by Section 200 of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

Drugs Tsar

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the selection procedure for *(a)* the Drug Tzar and *(b)* his Deputy. [64695]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, Keith Hellawell, was appointed following a fair and open competition. The process was in line with the Nolan principles, including the involvement of an independent member on the interview panel. The post was advertised in the national press attracting a very strong field of over 200 applicants. Of these, seven demonstrating the strongest evidence of the core skills for the job, were selected for interview. The interview panel appointed Mike Trace as deputy because his background and expertise provided a valuable supporting role to the Co-ordinator.

Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee (Security Passes)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if Liberal Democrat members of the Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee have been issued with security passes giving them access to secure areas in Government buildings. [64773]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: No.

Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee (Pension Proposals)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what representations he has received from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) concerning the Government's pensions proposals; and if these will be discussed at the Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee. [64774]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: Representations on the Government's pensions proposals are a matter for my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Social Security.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Childcare

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what plans he has to extend the registration of childcare workers to those providing childcare for the over-eights; [65052]

(2) what plans he has to increase the quality of childcare provision for the over-eights and related health and safety aspects; [65055]

(3) what estimate he has made of the cost of bringing childcare provision for the over-eights into the registration system; [65053]

(4) what research his Department has commissioned on parents' views of the quality and registration of childcare provision. [65054]

Ms Hodge: I refer my hon. Friend to the replies I gave to the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 668–69.

Free School Meals

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the estimated annual cost would be of extending free school meals *(a)* to all children, *(b)* to all children under 11 years, *(c)* to all children whose parents are in receipt of working families tax credit and *(d)* to children under 11 years whose parents are in receipt of working families tax credit. [64683]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have no plans to extend eligibility for free school meals and have not therefore made precise costings. We estimate the approximate cost in England of *(a)* to be £1.8 billion and of *(b)* to be £1 billion. On the basis of assumptions by the Inland Revenue on the numbers of children whose parents will be in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit, we estimate the approximate cost of *(c)* to be some £410 million and of *(d)* to be £210 million.

GCSEs (Northern Ireland)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will initiate research into the reasons why school pupils in Northern Ireland achieve better results in GCSEs and A Levels than pupils in England. [64525]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government have set in place a range of policies designed to raise standards in all schools in England, including the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, Education Development Plans, measures to tackle school and LEA failure, Education Action Zones and target setting by schools. These approaches are backed by the significant additional resources for schools announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review and are based on a range of evidence about what raises standards drawn from across the UK and internationally. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no plans for research of the type suggested.

School Reserves

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department gives schools on the level of reserves which they should hold. [64954]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not issue detailed guidance on this matter. However, reserves held by schools should be used effectively, and to this end the Department has encouraged local education authorities to recycle reserves through loan schemes, while preserving the right of schools to draw on their reserves when needed. Authorities are also permitted to require schools to report on the intended use of reserves in excess of a certain level as determined by the authority, so as to encourage a planned approach to the holding of reserves.

Autism

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what data he has collated with respect to the incidence of special educational needs related to autism among children; and if he will list the numbers and percentage of such children by education authority area and for each of the last 20 years. [64911]

Mr. Charles Clarke: These figures are not available. Provisions in the Education Act 1981, now consolidated into the Education Act 1996, require schools to submit information on numbers of pupils with special educational needs. In accordance with the recommendation of the Warnock Committee, there is no requirement for them to record the nature of the disability or learning difficulty and we have no current intention to require them to do so.

New Deal (Eastleigh)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal gateway in the Eastleigh borough council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [64753]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is not possible to provide separate figures for individual towns or council areas. The latest Government Statistical Service figures for the Southampton and South West Hampshire Unit of Delivery, which covers Eastleigh, show that, to the end of September 1998, *(a)* 751 young people had entered the Gateway and 97 had secured unsubsidised employment *(b)* 108 had joined one of the four options: 29 on the Employment option; 7 on the Voluntary Sector option; 1 on the Environment Task Force; and 71 on the Full-Time Education and Training option.

Trade Unions (New Deal)

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of people taken on under the New Deal by the trade unions. [64748]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Central records are not kept of the 52,800 young people who have found work under New Deal and the 35,400 employer agreements that have been signed. This information is not held centrally; however, we have worked closely with the TUC over the implementation of New Deal and are grateful for their support and we do know that a number of individual Trade Unions have taken on young people under the New Deal.

League Tables

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he has taken to assess the validity of league tables for state schools which include a value-added element. [65078]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Extensive development work has been done by the Department and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority on methods of calculating measures of value-added by schools for publication in performance tables. We have also conducted a pilot study, involving some 200 state and independent schools, to investigate a variety of options for presenting school value-added indicators based on information about individual pupil performance. The results of the pilot study were published on 1 December, as a supplement to the 1998 secondary school performance tables. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Playgroups

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to announce the recipients of the DfEE/Pre-School Learning Alliance grants for playgroups. [65046]

Ms Hodge: A total of £407,000 has been paid to date in grants of up to £1,000 to 497 voluntary pre-schools and playgroups, including 5 in Oxfordshire. A few applications for which further information is required remain to be decided. A list of grant recipients will be placed in the Library in due course.

I am grateful to the Pre-school Learning Alliance, Playgroup Network, Gloucestershire Parents and Toddlers Association and many Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships for their help in the administration of this scheme for assisting pre-schools and playgroups in financial difficulty.

Astra Staff

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in what circumstances ex-Astra staff are eligible to apply for Civil Service vacancies. [64697]

Mr. Mudie: Those ex-Astra employees who were former civil servants can, like any other former civil servants, apply for reappointment into the Civil Service. Reappointment is not automatic and depends on there being suitable vacancies. Applicants must also meet the current competencies required for the job in question. Those ex-Astra staff who were not former civil servants can, like anyone else, apply for any advertised vacancies, subject to the provisions of the Civil Service Order in Council 1995.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on outstanding issues concerning ex-Astra employees. [64696]

Mr. Mudie: There are no outstanding issues but I am currently considering representations made on behalf of employees of the former Astra Training Services Ltd.

This Government introduced a package of special measure, both financial and non-financial, that helped those who were potentially worse affected by this failed privatisation. The administrators of the Astra Pension Scheme, Fountain Trustee Ltd., have confirmed that all ex-Astra staff are getting their full accrued pensions as they reach the retirement age of 60.

Disability Rights Commission

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out the basis of the estimated annual running cost of the proposed Disability Rights Commission. [65113]

Ms Hodge: The estimated budget for the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) was calculated by examining its proposed functions and assessing the associated costs using the best information available. This involved drawing on information about the running costs of the existing commissions where their functions are similar and taking account of issues arising specifically in the context of disability. We believe the estimate is realistic and reflects the important work the DRC will be expected to undertake. In due course, we will review the DRC's funding in the light of its operational experience.

PFI Projects

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which local education authorities have requested funding for PFI projects additional to their original estimates. [65189]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The local education authorities that have requested funding additional to their original estimates for PFI projects are as follows:

Birmingham
Cornwall
Dorset
Dudley
Kingston upon Hull
Leeds
Manchester
North Yorkshire
Sheffield
Staffordshire
Stoke on Trent
Tower Hamlets
Westminster.

Many of these projects are very early Pathfinders and the original estimates of costs were based on limited information. However, in all cases, local education authorities have been required to demonstrate that the projects continue to provide value for money at the increased level of funding. The initial assessment of PFI project costs has improved as greater experience of schools PFI has been gained.

Schools (Temporary Classrooms)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the Government's policy towards the use of temporary classrooms in schools. [63444]

Ms Estelle Morris: Temporary classrooms can provide a suitable solution to accommodation issues in schools. Whether they are appropriate in any particular instance is usually a matter for the local education authority or the grant-maintained school. However, we have made clear that, where additional accommodation is required to implement our class size pledge, LEAs should seek to provide permanent and not temporary classrooms.

Teachers' Salaries

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the median salary of a secondary school teacher with 10 years' experience was as a percentage of *(a)* average industrial male earnings, *(b)* the salary of a police sergeant with 10 years service in that rank and *(c)* the salary of a middle-ranking member

of the professional, administrative and managerial grade in local authority service in 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995 and currently. [62084]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The median salary of a secondary school teacher with 10 years' experience is not available for the years before 1985. Since 1985, the median salary of secondary school teachers with 10 years' experience as a percentage of the other groups of workers was as follows:

Percentage

Year	*All occupations: full-time males paid on adult rates*	*Police sergeant with 10 years' service*[1]	*Local government officers: full-time staff on adult rates*[2]
1985	96	78	n.a.
1990	101	86	78
1995	113	89	94
1997	111	88	89

[1] The salary of a police sergeant excludes London weighting and allowances, housing emoluments, overtime payments and any other additions to basic salary.

[2] Local government officers have been identified from the New Earnings Survey as SOC group 102. Information is not readily available for 1985. The small samples on which this group is based may make the data unreliable.

Agricultural Colleges

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will review the future structure and funding of the land-based and agricultural colleges. [63814]

Mr. Mudie: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no plans to do so. The Further Education Funding Council is due to publish soon a report reviewing the adequacy and sufficiency of facilities for further education provision for agriculture.

New Deal (Hampshire)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 82, on the New Deal in Portsmouth, if the figure for clients who secured unsubsidised jobs is included in the total figure of those who entered the Gateway; and what were the destinations for the people not accounted for under the four options. [64260]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The 143 young people who secured unsubsidised jobs are included in the figure of 1,094 young people who had entered the Gateway by the end of September 1998. 217 young people had joined one of the four options; 633 were in the Gateway; 18 had left New Deal to claim other benefits; 19 had left for other known destinations, including other training, travelling abroad, imprisonment; and 64 had left for unknown destinations.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the Rushmoor Borough Council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [64255]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is not possible to provide separate figures for individual towns or council areas. The latest Government Statistical Service figures for the Guildford Unit of Delivery, which covers Rushmoor, show that, to the end of September 1998, *(a)* 416 young people had entered the Gateway and 82 secured unsubsidised employment; *(b)* 48 had joined one of the four options: 6 on the Employment option; 6 on the Voluntary Sector option; 1 on the Environment Task Force; and 35 on the Full-Time Education and Training option. 229 young people were on the Gateway, 16 had left New Deal to claim other benefits, 9 had gone to other known destinations, including other training, travelling abroad, imprisonment; and 32 had gone to unknown destinations.

Education (Staffordshire)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures his Department has taken since May 1997 to improve the provision of education in Staffordshire. [64506]

Ms Estelle Morris: The table sets out details of the financial support that Staffordshire has received since May 1997, through the education SSA system, the Standards Fund, Schools Capital and the New Deal for Schools. Details of the Standards Fund allocations and support for capital funding for schools for 1999–2000 will be announced in due course.

Staffordshire LEA	*£ million*
Education SSA increase	17.6
Standards fund	8.5
Capital support	6.2
New Deal for schools	3.5
Provisional education SSA 1999–2000	18.3
Total allocation	54.1

Notes:

1. Capital Support includes both Annual Capital Guideline (ACG) and Supplementary Credit Approval (SCA).
2. The Standards Fund figures include both the LEA and government grant contributions.

Grammar Schools

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of children in *(a)* England and *(b)* Northern Ireland attend grammar schools. [64526]

Ms Estelle Morris: In January 1998, 4.5 per cent. of all pupils aged 11 and over in maintained schools in England attended grammar schools.

Information for Northern Ireland is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost implications of the restructuring of Kent's schooling system which would be required if grammar schools were to be abolished; and if he will place the breakdown of that estimate in the Library. [64497]

Ms Estelle Morris: None. It is for parents in Kent to decide whether or not they wish to retain selection by reference to high academic ability. If they voted to do so,

the law would require only the admission authorities of those schools to change their admission arrangements. Any other changes would be a matter for decision at local level.

Physical Education

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many places have been made available for specialist PE teachers on initial teacher training courses in each of the last five years. [64715]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the target intake to physical education (PE) initial teacher training for the years 1994–95 to 1998–99.

Target recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) courses in England, 1994–95 to 1998–99

Year	*Target intake*
1994–95	1,255
1995–96	1,250
1996–97	1,300
1997–98	1,550
1998–99	1,450

Source:
DfEE

Counter-drugs Strategy

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he has taken to ensure that those training to be teachers are fully equipped to present in schools the Government's counter-drugs strategy. [64517]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Curriculum for teacher training ensures that all teachers must be able to address pupils' personal, moral and social development. This will provide a focus for the full range of personal, social and health education work, including drug education. As certain aspects of drug education are a statutory requirement of National Curriculum science, all primary school teachers and secondary school science teachers are trained in drug education.

We have made increased funding of £7 million available this year through the Department's Standards Fund programme for drug education and prevention work. Eligible expenditure includes direct and associated costs of training teachers in schools. Further support of £7.5 million is to be made available through the Standards Fund for each of the next three years, following the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The DfEE has also recently issued new drug education guidance for teachers and youth workers, on the effective delivery of drug education in schools and youth service settings, and on dealing with drug-related incidents. The guidance encourages schools to take note of best practice and assist them in developing and implementing their own drug education programmes and policies.

New Deal (Gateway)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by region and up to the latest date for which the figures are available the numbers of young people leaving the New Deal for unsubsidised employment who have subsequently re-entered the Gateway, indicating the average time such people have spent in employment before returning to the Gateway. [63272]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* This information is not currently available as individuals who return to New Deal within 13 weeks resume where they left off. Information on the length and time spent on unsubsidised jobs will be available at a later stage from the longer-term evaluation of New Deal. Destination information published in the monthly statistical press notice is subsequently revised to reflect those returning to the New Deal Gateway before 13 weeks of employment.

Departmental Communications

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many communications were sent by his Department to *(a)* primary schools, *(b)* secondary schools and *(c)* local education authorities in each month of 1998 for which details are available; and if he will list them specifying the subjects they covered. [63961]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* The Department sent 70 communications to primary schools and 73 communications to secondary schools in 1998. Most items were for information only. Since June 1998, schools have received material in regular batches which clearly indicate the priority of items. From 1 December, batches contain only: guidance on legal changes, curriculum development material on key strategies such as literacy and numeracy, data collection and 2-page summaries of documents on key policy issues.

All communications to schools are also copied to the local education authority—in some cases there is action in these for both school and local education authority. In addition, local education authorities received 179 communications that were not sent also to schools. A list has been placed in the Library.

SCOTLAND

Government Funding (Competitive Bidding)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the schemes for competitive bidding for central Government funding by local authorities and voluntary organisations run by his Department in *(a)* 1998; *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1996, and the amounts of money involved and the number of successful and unsuccessful bids in each scheme in each year. [63560]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The information is contained in the table.

Scheme	1996 Successful bids	1996 Unsuccessful bids	1996 Amount involved (£ million)	1997 Successful bids	1997 Unsuccessful bids	1997 Amount involved (£ million)	1998 Successful bids	1998 Unsuccessful bids	1998 Amount involved (£ million)
Education									
Alternatives to Exclusion Grant Scheme	—	—	—	—	—	—	18	14	3.0
School Rationalisation 1998–99	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	8	15.0
Transport									
Transport Challenge Fund	5	7	28.5	9	10	29.7	—	—	—
Cycle Challenge Fund	—	—	—	37	43	0.650	—	—	—
Rural Community Transport Grant Scheme	—	—	—	—	—	—	10	8	0.340
Urban Programme									
Programme for Partnership	23	27	77.0[1]	—	—	—	—	—	—
Capital									
Central Challenge Fund[2]	—	—	—	19	33	16.1	—	—	—
PFI Level Playing Field Support	—	—	—	—	—	—	10	13	660.1
Housing									
Empty Homes Initiative	—	—	—	33	56	2.0	102	86	7.0
Rough Sleepers Initiative	—	—	—	35	39	4.0	37	26	5.0
New Housing Partnership	—	—	—	—	—	—	27	5	34.6
Health Care									
Mental Health Development Fund	—	—	—	—	—	—	22	56	1.578
Local Care Partnership Scheme	—	—	—	—	—	—	12	36	0.554
Social Work									
Section 10(1) of Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968	135	[3]—	7.6	112	[3]—	7.4	97	[3]—	7.0
Ethnic Minority Grant Scheme	4	36	0.200	9	23	0.225	6	29	0.275
Transitional Fund (1996 only)	275	133	3.5	—	—	—	—	—	—
Asylum Seekers Grant	—	—	—	13	1	0.631	[3]—	[3]—	—

[1] Over 3 years
[2] Funding for 1997 bids staged over 2 years
[3] Figures not yet available

Birthweights

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will state the percentage of low birthweight live births in each Scottish health board area broken down by *(a)* single and *(b)* all live births for the last three years. [64425]

Mr. Galbraith: The information is as follows:

Percentage of all live births and singleton live births which are low birthweight (less than 2,500g) by health board of residence [1,2] for years ending 31 March

	1996		1997		1998	
	All live births	Single live births	All live births	Single live births	All live births	Single live births
Scotland	6.9	5.6	6.9	5.5	6.8	5.5
Argyll & Clyde	6.8	5.2	6.5	5.6	7.0	5.6
Ayrshire & Arran	6.8	5.1	6.5	5.2	7.0	5.5
Borders	5.7	5.2	6.7	5.3	5.3	4.6
Dumfries & Galloway	6.3	5.1	6.6	4.7	6.1	4.6
Fife	7.3	5.7	6.6	5.4	6.1	5.1
Forth Valley	7.0	5.7	7.2	5.2	7.1	5.3
Grampian	5.6	4.7	6.0	4.9	6.3	5.2
Greater Glasgow	8.3	6.8	8.0	6.7	8.1	6.7
Highland	6.4	5.1	6.0	4.8	5.6	4.0
Lanarkshire	6.5	5.3	7.0	5.6	6.9	5.6
Lothian	6.7	5.4	7.3	5.8	6.5	5.1
Orkney	3.6	3.7	2.8	1.5	3.1	2.1
Shetland	1.8	1.8	4.4	3.3	4.8	3.1
Tayside	7.3	5.9	6.2	4.7	6.6	5.6
Western Isles	4.5	2.9	2.1	1.3	4.0	2.8

[1] Excludes cases resident outwith Scotland and those where the health board of residence is not known
[2] Excludes home births

EU Funding (Mining Areas)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* in total and *(b)* by project over £50,000 the amount of EU funding given to mining or former mining areas in (i) Fife, (ii) Ayrshire and (iii) East Lothian over the past five years. [64456]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* The information on total European Structural Fund assistance is provided in the table. The individual project lists are extensive. I have arranged for them to be placed in the Library.

£

Area	*European Structural Funds Assistance (1 January 1994 to 31 December 1998 inclusive)*
Fife	[1]66,935,119
Ayrshire	[1]33,149,607
East Lothian	1,590,675

[1] These figures include a small number of projects where activity extends outwith the coalfield areas

World Heritage Sites

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Joint Nature Conservation Committee was consulted on the proposal to nominate the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf as a world heritage site. [64412]

Mr. Macdonald: We have sought advice from Scottish Natural Heritage on the merits of the proposal to nominate the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf as a World Heritage Site. I understand that, in framing their advice, Scottish Natural Heritage had discussions with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

Scottish Office Building, Victoria Quay

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what are the expected costs up to the end of the financial year 1999–2000 of replacing, upgrading and maintaining security, heating and ventilation and lighting control systems in the Scottish Office building at Victoria Quay; what changes there have been in those estimates over the last 18 months; and what has been the annual cost of these since the building opened. [64457]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* The maintenance of security, heating, ventilation and lighting systems at Victoria Quay is carried out by SERCo Ltd. under contract to The Scottish Office. The information sought is not held by The Scottish Office in the form requested. SERCo have, however, provided figures which relate to their categorisation of expenditure and financial year.

The table shows the expenditure on replacing, upgrading and maintaining the security, heating, ventilation and lighting systems over the 18 months to December 1998 and estimated expenditure for the calendar year 1999. There has been no change to estimates over the previous 18 months.

£

	July 1997-December 1998			*1999–2000*		
	Replacing	*Upgrading*	*Maintaining*	*Replacing*	*Upgrading*	*Maintaining*
Security	—	33,000	10,000	—	30,000	8,000
Heating	—	3,600	215,898	—	5,000	129,000
Ventilation	—	9,600	—	—	—	—
Lighting	10,000	22,000	28,450	70,000	41,000	22,500

Scottish Parliament

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proportion of his Department's staff will be redeployed in the Scottish Parliament; and how many new staff are being recruited for the Scottish Parliament. [64454]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* Numbers have not yet been finalised. 172 posts in the Parliament have been advertised externally. 26 posts have been identified to be filled initially by Scottish Office staff on secondment to facilitate the transition from the set up to the operational phase.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his letter to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon of 2 December 1998 concerning ministerial use of RAF flights, if the term "average cost" refers to the average cost per passenger. [64735]

Mr. Dewar: The "average cost" refers to the average cost per trip and not average cost per passenger.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Construction Industry

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on the construction industry of the rule that self-employed subcontractors in continual employment for 11 weeks must be regarded as employees. [64461]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I am aware of no such rule.

Redundancy Payments

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the average time taken by each Redundancy Pay Services Department office to process claims for redundancy payment in the last year for which figures are available. [64515]

Mr. Ian McCartney: In the Financial Year 1998–99, to date, the average time taken by each Redundancy Payments Office to process claims for redundancy payments was nine weeks for the Birmingham Office and six weeks for both the Edinburgh and Watford Offices.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will change the rules for compensatory payments in lieu of notice in cases where a firm becomes insolvent so that the ex-employee is paid the full amount to which they would have been entitled if they had been made redundant by a firm which was not insolvent. [64564]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Payments in lieu of notice constitute damages for breach of an employee's contract, and the courts have established (*Westwood -v- Secretary of State for Employment 1984)* that they are subject to the common law principle of mitigation. This means that they may be reduced by income which the employee received, or could have received, during what should have been the notice period. Compensatory notice payments made on behalf of insolvent employers by my Department, under the Employment Rights Act 1996, are therefore calculated on the same basis. They are also subject to a statutory limit (currently £220 per week) which is reviewed annually. There are no plans to abolish the limit as the statutory scheme is intended to provide only a basic level of protection for former employees of insolvent companies. Amounts owed above the statutory limit stand as a debt in the insolvency proceedings.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the average time taken by the Edgbaston Redundancy Pay Services Department office to process claims for redundancy payment; and what is the equivalent time for each other office. [64568]

Mr. Ian McCartney: In the Financial Year 1998/99, to date, the average time taken by the Redundancy Payments Office in Edgbaston, Birmingham, to process claims for redundancy payments was nine weeks. The equivalent time for both the Edinburgh and Watford Offices was six weeks.

European Structural Funds

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultations he has undertaken in relation to the criteria for restructuring assistance under the European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund and other funds. [64988]

Mr. Wills: I and my officials have undertaken a series of consultations with National bodies on all issues relating to the reform of European Structural Funds during the course of the negotiations. Consultations with local and regional organisations are organised by the Scottish Office, Northern Ireland Office, Welsh Office, by the DETR and the Government Offices in England.

The information received from all these consultations is used by the Department of Trade and Industry in developing the UK's policy on the reform of the European Structural Funds.

Motor Industry

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the number of people employed in the United Kingdom motor vehicle and parts industry *(a)* on the last date for which figures are available, *(b)* 10 years ago and *(c)* 20 years ago. [64843]

Mr. Battle: The number of people employed in the UK motor vehicle and parts industry as of September 1998 was 223,900. The figure for June 1988 was 244,100 and for June 1978 427,200 (source ONS, Labour Market Trends).

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the term "average cost", with reference to flights taken by Ministers in his Department, refers to the average cost per passenger. [64719]

Mr. Byers: The "average cost" refers to the average cost per trip and not average cost per passenger.

Minimum Wage

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he plans to lay national minimum wage regulations before the House of Commons. [64766]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I will present the national minimum wage regulations to the House for approval shortly.

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received requesting an exemption for religious communities from the national minimum wage. [64767]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have received a number of representations requesting exemption for religious communities from the national minimum wage.

Parental Leave

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the implications of the introduction of parental leave for families on low incomes. [63203]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The introduction of a right to parental leave will provide more choice for employees with children in balancing work and family responsibilities. We will monitor the impact of the new provisions.

British Activity Holiday Association

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if ministers in his Department will meet a deputation representing the British Activity Holiday Association. [65260]

Mr. Ian McCartney: A deputation from the British Activity Holiday Association met my officials on 18 December.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Organophosphates

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the use of organophosphates in grain stores. [63993]

Mr. Rooker: All pesticides, including organophosphorus (OP) compounds for use in grain stores, are regulated under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 or the Plant Protection Products Regulations 1995. Applicants wishing to gain approval for the use, sale, supply, storage and advertisement of such products are required to submit a substantive data package which is then subject to a rigorous assessment for safety and efficacy.

Pesticide active ingredients are subject to review either for routine purposes or because there is a specific concern. In May 1998, I announced a UK review of anticholinesterase compounds (including OPs) which will re-assess the risk that the use of such products present to consumers, workers and the environment.

The regulatory process includes an assessment of the effectiveness for use against the target pests for which approval and thus use is sought. Approval is only recommended if effectiveness is demonstrated. MAFF funded R&D has provided useful data by providing information about resistance to specific pesticides in farm and commercial grain stores. In 1996 the Advisory Committee on Pesticides concluded that information on the prevalence and control of resistant strains should be added to the labels of pesticides used in, amongst other areas, grain stores. This recommendation has been accepted by Ministers and implemented.

Ministerial Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his e-mail address. [62568]

Mr. Nick Brown: My e-mail address for correspondence is c.corres@sec.maff.gov.uk.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62816]

Mr. Morley: The following sets out the remit, membership and members' remuneration of Advisory Groups whose members are appointed by MAFF Ministers, reflecting membership as at 31 December 1998. The remuneration figures include attendance payments and payments for preparatory work. Reasonable expenses are payable for members' travel and subsistence costs; these are specific to each member and have therefore not been included. Details of members' principal employment could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

Neither the Ministry nor its Agencies have any Task Forces or Review Panels whose members are appointed by Ministers. However, there are several groups with flexible membership which have been formed either for a specific issue or on an on-going basis so that the Ministry may involve industry and other interested parties in its processes. Attendance at meetings of these groups is voluntary and no remuneration or expenses are payable to those who attend. Attendance is apt to change from meeting to meeting, therefore details of these groups have not been given.

Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes

To advise Health and Agriculture Ministers of Great Britain and Heads of the Departments of Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland on matters relating to the irradiation of food or the manufacture of novel foods or foods produced by novel processes, having regard to the views of relevant expert bodies.

		£ per meeting
Prof. Peter John Aggett	Member	138
Prof. Janet Mary Bainbridge	Chairperson	176
Prof. Charles Brown	Member	138
Dr. Philip John Dale	Member	138
Dr. Michael J. Gasson	Member	138
Dr. John Heritage	Member	138
Prof. David Arthur Ledward	Member	138
Reverend Dr. Michael Jonathan Reiss	Member	138
Prof. Ian Rowland	Member	138
Mrs. E. Russell	Member	138
Prof. Thomas Andrew Bruce Sanders	Member	138
Prof. Herbert Sewell	Member	138
Dr. Norman Alan Simmons	Member	138
Prof. Ronald Walker	Member	138
Prof. H. F. Woods	Member	138

Advisory Committee on Pesticides

To advise Ministers, either when requested to do so or otherwise, on any matters relating to the control of pests including the safety of pesticides in respect of people, animals, crops and the environment.

		£ per meeting
Prof. Sir Colin Leonard Berry	Chairperson	175
Prof. Alan Boobis	Member	138
Mrs. Elaine Prosser Brown	Member	138
Prof. Peter Calow	Member	138
Dr. Andree Denise Carter	Member	138
Prof. David N. M. Coggon	Member	138
Prof. Donald L. Lee	Member	138
Mr. Jim Orson	Member	138
Mrs. Sylvia Mary Owen	Member	138
Dr. Alexander Thompson Proudfoot	Member	138
Prof. Thomas Michael Roberts	Member	138
Prof. Geoffrey Roger Sagar CBE	Deputy Chairperson	138
Prof. Ian C. Shaw	Member	138
Dr. Colin A. Soutar	Member	138
Prof. Paul Webster	Member	138

Agricultural Dwelling House Advisory Committees

To advise housing authorities on the agricultural need and urgency when a farmer asks the authority to re-house an ex-employee, because he needs the accommodation for an incoming worker. An ADHAC is formed to deal with each individual case. When an ADHAC is formed, a Chair is chosen from amongst the members.

		£ per day
Anglia Region		
Mr. Christopher J. Barker	Member	86
Mr. A. F. Felstead	Member	86
Ms Jeanette Irene Firrell	Member	86
Mr. C. Gillot	Member	86
Mr. M. J. Harrison	Member	86
Mr. Edward Thomas Kirby	Member	86
Mr. A. W. J. Langford	Member	86
Mr. Peter G. Scates	Member	86
East Midlands Region		
Mr. B. J. Clayton	Member	86
Miss Emma J. Huntsman	Member	86
Mr. Thomas Anthony Twigg	Member	86
Mr. A. R. Wylde	Member	86
North Eastern Region		
Mr. Derek R. Gardner	Member	86
Mr. Kenneth Graham	Member	86
South Mercia Region		
Mr. Raymond Druett	Member	86
Mr. C. Patrick Love	Member	85
Mrs. Evelyn Mary Milton	Member	86
Mr. Glyn Nicholas	Member	86
Mrs. Joyce E. Thomas	Member	86
Mr. Roger Bailey Weaver	Member	86
Wessex Region		
Mr. George R. Bartaby	Member	86
Mr. G. C. Clifton	Member	86
Mr. K. A. Parsons	Member	86

Committee of Investigation for Great Britain

To consider and report to the Minister, if the Minister concerned with agriculture in the area effected directs, on; *(i)* any report made by the appropriate Consumers' Committee appointed under section 19 of the Agricultural Marketing Act 1958, *(ii)* any complaints made to the Minister as to the operation of a marketing scheme applicable to England and Wales, to Great Britain or to the United Kingdom which, in the opinion of the Minister, could not be considered by a Consumers' Committee, *(iii)* any question referred to the Minister under section 20(3) of the 1958 Act, which deals with directions that may be given by the Minister to Marketing Boards.

		£ per day
Mr. Raymond Harris	Member	130
Mr. Hugh Humphreys-Jones	Member	130
Mrs. Rowena Lawrence-Mills Bsc	Member	130
Dame Sheila Masters CBE	Member	130
Mrs. Eileen Masterman	Member	130
Mrs. Suzan Matthews QC	Chairperson	253
Mr. Denis G. G. Moloney LLB	Member	130

Consumers Committee for Great Britain

To consider and report to the Minister on:

(i) the effect of Agricultural Marketing Schemes (now only wool) on consumers.

(ii) any complaints made to the Committees, on the schemes by consumers.

Name		
Mrs. Dorothy Cockerell	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Barbara L. M. Hawkins	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Janet Laurence	Chairperson	Expenses only
Mr. John Murphy	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Joy Roberts	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Marjorie Snowden	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Gilbert Tracy	Member	Expenses only

Consumer Panel

To bring to the attention of Ministers food issues of concern to consumers; to advise on the transparency for consumers of Ministers food policies; to advise on the transmission to consumers of advice and information relating to Ministers' policies.

		£ per meeting
MAFF Minister of State, Mr. Rooker	Chairperson	Nil
Mrs. Susan Baker	Member	139
Dr. John Godfrey	Member	139
Mr. John Keith Hosker	Member	139
Miss Jane Lloyd Hughes	Member	139
Mrs. Mary H. Kidd JP	Member	139
Mrs. Janet Laurence	Member	139
Ms Eva Lewis	Member	139
Ms Jacqueline Salfield	Member	139
Mrs. Phyllis M. Sluice	Member	139
Dr. Jane Wilde	Member	139

An additional fee of £28 is payable for writing papers which are discussed in meetings.

Farm Animal Welfare Council

To keep under review the welfare of farm animals on agricultural land, at markets, in transit and at place of slaughter, and to advise Agriculture Ministers of any legislative or other changes that may be necessary.

		£ per meeting
Prof. Mike Baxter	Member	111
Mrs. Rosemary Berry	Member	111
Mr. Glenn Berry	Member	111
Prof. Donald M. Broom	Member	111
Prof. Stephen R. L. Clark	Member	111
Mr. John A. C. Don	Member	111
Dr. Peter Roderick English	Member	111
Mr. Tim Charles Harris	Member	111
Ms Vicki Hird	Member	111
Mr. Gareth Jones Lloyd	Member	111
Mr. Anthony Robin Lucas	Member	111
Mrs. Judy Macarthur Clark	Member	111
Mr. Richard Maunder	Member	111
Prof. John Peter McInerney OBE	Member	111
Miss Miriam Jane Parker	Member	111
Dr. Mark Pattison	Member	111
Dr. Martin James Potter	Member	111
Mr. Francis Edward Shields OBE	Member	111
Prof. Sir Colin Raymond William Spedding CBE	Chairperson	176
Mr. Paul Staines MBE	Member	111
Mrs. Josephine Margaret Turnbull	Member	111
Mr. Mike Vaughan	Member	111
Dr. Agnes Winter	Member	111

Food Advisory Committee

To assess the risks to humans of chemicals which are used in or on food and to advise Ministers on the exercise of powers in the Food Safety Act 1990 relating to the labelling, composition and chemical safety of food. The Committee will also advise Ministers on general matters relating to food safety. In exercising its functions the Food Advisory Committee will take the advice and work of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT), the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP), the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) and other relevant advisory committees into account.

		£ per meeting
Mrs. Matti Alderson	Member	138
Prof. Sir Colin Murray Campbell	Chairperson	176
Mr. Neville Craddock	Member	138
Mrs. Dorothy Craig	Member	138
Dr. E. Maureen S. Edmonson	Member	138
Prof. Catherine Geissler	Member	138
Dr. Catherine Humphries	Member	138
Dr. Christopher Llewelyn	Member	138
Prof. Alan Malcolm	Member	138
Mr. Roger Manley	Deputy Chairperson	138
Dr. Charles McDonald	Member	138
Mr. Thomas Miller	Member	138
Prof. Christopher Ritson	Member	138
Prof. Susan Shaw	Member	138
Mr. Philip William Strachan	Member	138
Prof. H. Frank Woods	Member	138

Hill Farming Advisory Committee for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

To advise on any hill farming matters referred to them by the Minister and the Secretary of State for Wales.

Name		
MAFF Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. Morley	Chairperson	Nil
Mr. Edmund S. Bailey	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Richard Betton	Member	Expenses only
Mr. William John Cockbain	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Philip Henry Cornelius	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Esther Baddeley Cummins	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Joyce Gilman	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Elizabeth Ann Hayton	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Patrick J. Kelly	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Cyril Stobart Lewis	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Rosemary Ann Mudge	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Colin Passmore	Member	Expenses only
Mr. David Pearson	Member	Expenses only
Mr. T. D. Prince	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Hugh Robert Thomas	Member	Expenses only
Mr. John Vaughan	Deputy Chairperson	Expenses only

Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee

To provide scientifically-based advice to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of Health and territorial departments on matters relating to spongiform encephalopathies, taking due account of the remit of other bodies with related responsibilities.

		£ per day
Prof. Adriano Aguzzi	Member	186
Prof. Jeffrey William Almond	Member	186
Prof. Roy Anderson FRS	Member	186
Mr. Christopher Bostock	Member	186
Mr. Raymond Bradley OBE	Member	186
Prof. Fred Brown	Member	186
Prof. John Collinge	Member	186
Prof. Anne Ferguson	Member	186
Dr. Peter N. Goodfellow FRS	Member	186
Prof. William D. Hueston	Member	186
Prof. Harriet Kimbell MBE	Member	186
Dr. Richard Henry Kimberlin OBE	Member	186
Dr. Michael John Painter	Member	186
Prof. Sir John Ridley Pattison	Chairperson	218
Mr. David Barton Pepper	Member	186
Prof. Peter George Smith	Member	186
Dr. William Albert Watson CB	Member	186
Dr. Robert George Will	Deputy Chairperson	186

Sugar Beet Research and Education Committee

Under section 68 of the Food Act 1984, as amended by the Food Safety Act 1990.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Secretary of State for Wales are required to prepare, each year after consultation with the sugar beet processors and growers, a programme for carrying out research and education in matters affecting the growing of home grown sugar beet.

The Act also provides for the programme to be brought into effect by means of an order, and to be financed by a levy on the producers and growers.

		£ per meeting
Dr. Michael J. Armstrong	Member	155
Mr. Melvyn Frank Askew	Member	155
Dr. David James Carmichael	Member	155
Mr. Christopher Robert Arthur Carter	Member	155
Mr. Hugh Roger Dyas	Chairperson	181
Prof. John H. R. Hoyles	Member	155
Prof. Roger Plumb	Member	155

Veterinary Products Committee

To give advice with respect to safety, quality and efficacy in relation to the veterinary use of any substance or article (not being an instrument, apparatus or appliance) to which any provision of the Medicines Act is applicable. To promote the collection of information relating to suspected adverse reactions for the purpose of enabling such advice to be given.

		£ per day
Prof. Ian Douglas Aitken OBE	Chairperson	210
Dr. David Nicholas Bateman	Member	165
Dr. Arnold S. Cooke	Member	165
Prof. Anthony Dayan	Member	165
Prof. Rosalind Margaret Gaskell	Member	165
Prof. George Gettinby	Member	165
Mrs. S. Janet Graham	Member	165
Prof. J. Harrington CBE	Member	165
Prof. Charles Anthony Hart	Member	165
Dr. R. J. Heitzman	Member	165
Dr. Michael H. Jepson	Member	165
Prof. Karl A. Linklater	Member	165
Dr. W. J. McCaughey	Member	165
Prof. Quentin McKellar	Member	165
Prof. Andrea Mary Nolan	Member	165
Dr. Mark Pattison	Member	165
Mrs. Susan Pauline Payne	Member	165
Dr. Christopher J. Powell	Member	165
Prof. Randolph Harvey Richards	Member	165

		£ per day
Mr. David Skilton	Member	165
Prof. Howard Norman Ernest Stevens	Member	165
Mr. Richard Arthur Wickham	Member	165
Dr. David Fergusson Wishart	Member	165

Independent Scientific Group on Cattle Tuberculosis

To advise Ministers on implementation of the Krebs Report on bovine TB in cattle and badgers by:

overseeing the design and analysis of the randomised trial to test the effectiveness of badger culling as a means of controlling bovine TB;

regularly monitoring the progress of, and outputs from, the experiment and assessing any important differences in results between treatments;

monitoring the data on Bovine TB in areas and species outside the experiment;

reporting to Ministers on progress; and

advising, as requested, on related issues.

		£ per hour
Prof. John Bourne MRCVS, CBE	Chairperson	25.70
Dr. Christl Donnelly	Deputy Chairperson	21.25
Sir David Cox FBA, FRS	Member	21.25
Prof. George Gettinby FRSE	Member	21.25
Prof. Ivan Morrison FRSE	Member	21.25
Institute for Animal Health	Member	21.25
Dr. Rosie Woodroffe	Member	21.25
Prof. John McInerney OBE, FRSA[1]	Member	21.25

[1] Co-opted member

The Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Group

To review existing policies and legislation in England and Wales concerning the management and conservation of salmon, trout, eels and freshwater fish and make recommendations. The review and recommendations should take particular account of:

the need to maintain, and where appropriate enhance, biodiversity;

the need to maximise the economic, social and recreational benefits derived from salmon and freshwater fisheries, taking account both of the interests of local communities and local factors and traditions;

the need for management of fisheries to be on a fully sustainable basis, taking account of the precautionary approach.

The review should also consider other factors that may affect the development and sustainability of these fisheries.

The review should examine the institutional arrangements for the regulation and management of these fisheries (including the role of the public sector, the need to involve all interested parties, and arrangements in tidal and coastal waters) and how best such arrangements can be funded.

Name		
Prof. Lynda Warren	Chairperson	Expenses only
Dr. Nick Giles	Member	Expenses only
Mr. John Golding	Member	Expenses only
Dr. Keith Hendry	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Derek Heselton MBE	Member	Expenses only
Mr. David Hodgkiss	Member	Expenses only
Mrs. Jean Howman	Member	Expenses only
Mrs Jane James	Member	Expenses only
Dr. Mike Ladle	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Frank Lythgoe	Member	Expenses only
Mr. David Moore	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Mervyn Mountjoy	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Pat O'Reilly	Member	Expenses only
Mr. Stanley Payne	Member	Expenses only
Dr. Anne Powell	Member	Expenses only
Mr. John Williams	Member	Expenses only

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the principal changes which he will be seeking in his discussions with EU ministers on CAP reforms. [63340]

Mr. Rooker: We are seeking the gradual reduction and eventual phasing out of price and production-related agricultural support.

We are also pushing for part of the savings from such a reduction in production support to be directed to measures which will protect and enhance the environment and help the rural economy adjust, particularly in more fragile rural areas.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the purpose of his visit to Welshpool on 7 December. [63407]

Mr. Nick Brown: To visit the market, and to meet with farmers, their representatives, and other members of the rural community.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the ministers in his Department have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64136]

Mr. Nick Brown: One. My hon. Friend the Minister of State gave an address at Buckinghamshire University on 26 June 1998.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much of the Comprehensive Spending Review moneys allocated to his Department has been allocated for the financial years (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–01 and (iii) 2001–02. [63520]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) on 27 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *156–58*.

Fisheries

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure an equality of fisheries monitoring and enforcement work across EU fishing nations. [64164]

Mr. Morley: Effective enforcement of measures to conserve fish stocks, applied consistently throughout the Community, is a high priority for this Government. It was one of the main issues we focused on during our Presidency and as a result of our initiative new measures

were adopted at the Fisheries Council in December 1998 which will improve fisheries control and enforcement in all Member States.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions British fisheries officers have visited fisheries enforcement officers of other EU nations in the last three years; and what reciprocal visits have taken place. [64163]

Mr. Morley: Since 1996 there have been some 20 occasions on which British Sea Fishery Officers employed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency and the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland have made official visits to other Member States. There have been 6 visits to the United Kingdom.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has for future decommissioning schemes for the British fishing fleet. [64166]

Mr. Morley: I have already announced that, following our Comprehensive Spending Review, we will be making a total of £10.5 million available over the three years from 1999–2000 for a limited decommissioning scheme aimed primarily at those fleet segments where effort control is not an option under MAGP IV. I hope to be able to bring detailed proposals before the House early in the New Year.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Department has made of the impact of decommissioning schemes in the last three years on the British fleet in terms of its *(a)* average age, *(b)* numbers of vessels, *(c)* overall effort of fleet, *(d)* effort of fleet by sector and *(e)* number of vessels by port; and if he will make a statement. [64165]

Mr. Morley: In the last 3 years, decommissioning schemes have removed 385 vessels, representing 11,802.28 tonnes, or approximately 5.5 per cent. of the fleet in capacity terms.

The effort of this on the average age of the fleet is difficult to determine because of other variables involved, for example vessels leaving the fleet through natural wastage, sales to third counties, licence aggregations resulting in replacement vessels entering the fleet etc.

There are similar issues in relation to the effect of decommissioning on fishing effort (which is the product of capacity, measured as vessel tonnage and engine power, and time spent at sea). In the absence of controls on time at sea under MAGP III, vessels remaining in the fleet were free to adjust their fishing patterns in response to circumstances and total fleet effort showed only a small decline in this period. Under MAGP IV arrangements, effective from the beginning of 1998, the UK has explicit fishing effort targets for most of the major fleet segments and is currently conforming with these. Full details of these targets, and of UK outturn by segment and in total against MAGP III capacity targets are set out in Commission Decision 98/124/EC.

Further information on the impact of the four decommissioning rounds in the period 1993–1996 is contained in the September 1997 Economic Evaluation of the Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Schemes commissioned by UK Fisheries Departments from Nautilus Consultants, copies of which are available in the House Library and on the internet. This includes specific information on vessel numbers by port, age and type of vessels decommissioned etc.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Department has made of the merits of individual transferable quotas; and what plans he has to introduce such quotas to the United Kingdom fishing fleet. [64162]

Mr. Morley: Experience elsewhere has so far suggested that individual transferable quotas (ITQs) work best in single species fisheries or where stocks are under the jurisdiction of a single authority, though even in these cases they can lead to significant increases in enforcement costs, which are often passed on to the fishermen concerned in the form of licence charges. I am not currently aware of their successful use in the kinds of mixed fisheries typical of EU waters, or in situations where vessels of many countries fish the same stocks.

I do not therefore have any plans to introduce ITQs for the UK fleet, but remain willing to consider any viable option for improving fisheries management.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what basis *(a)* he and *(b)* his Department's fisheries scientists calculated the effect of the precautionary principle for the purposes of negotiating the setting of the total allowable catches for 1999. [64157]

Mr. Morley: Over the last two years the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has been developing a new precautionary framework to its annual advice on total allowable catches (TACs) for fish stocks. UK fisheries scientists have contributed to this work. Reflecting progress made, this year's advice contains explicit suggested precautionary reference points in terms of spawning stock biomass and fishing mortality. Further work is needed to refine and develop the application of the precautionary approach but UK Ministers have taken account of ICES' suggested reference points in developing the United Kingdom's approach to the setting of 1999 TACs.

BSE Inquiry

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many witnesses who have given evidence to the BSE Inquiry now work for *(a)* public sector agencies other than under his Department and *(b)* private sector employees. [64077]

Mr. Rooker: Of the 66 witnesses who are serving or former MAFF officials, two now work for non-MAFF public sector agencies and five are employed within the private sector.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63883]

Mr. Morley: The over-riding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures is that they should be fair and selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin and not nationality. The ethnic origin categories monitored by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food are those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Antibiotics

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *103*, what assessment he has made of the proposal from the European Commission to ban the use of four antibiotic growth promoters from 1 January 1999. [64123]

Mr. Rooker: The proposal was put to the Council of Agriculture Ministers on 14 December 1998. We supported the proposal, which is designed to reduce the risk of the build up of microbial resistance to antibiotics in animals and man. It was possible that the abrupt introduction of the ban would adversely affect animal health and welfare, leading to an unnecessary increase in the use of therapeutic antibiotics. The ban will not therefore come into effect until 1 July 1999, giving livestock producers time to adapt to the loss of the four growth promoters. The proposal, as agreed, is in line with advice the Government have received from the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) and the Veterinary Products Committee that the use of antibiotics which may impair the efficacy of prescribed therapeutic antibiotics used in human medicine through the development of resistant strains of organisms should be phased out.

Monsanto

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what matters were discussed at the meetings held between Ministers and Monsanto on *(a)* 29 June 1998 and *(b)* 15 July 1998. [63385]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* These were private meetings at which matters relevant to both MAFF and Monsanto were discussed.

Growth Hormones

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the EU moratorium on the use of the BST growth hormone in dairy cattle; and if it is his policy to maintain the moratorium. [64224]

Mr. Rooker: Various representations have been made concerning the use of BST including some from members of the public in official correspondence. Also, new scientific information has been published which will be considered by a sub-group of the independent scientific Veterinary Products Committee (VPC). Once the information has been considered, we will be guided by the advice of the VPC in discussions on the future of the Community moratorium.

American Sugar

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received concerning the level of import levy on American sugar; for what reasons it is set at its current level; and when the level was last changed. [64236]

Mr. Rooker: I have not received any representations about the level of the EU import tariff on American sugar. The current level was set as part of the EU's obligations agreed under the Uruguay Round of world trade negotiations concluded in 1994. Under these obligations the level of import tariff is reduced annually from 1995–2000 (a total reduction of 20 per cent.). In addition to this tariff the EU can, when the import price falls below an agreed level, apply an additional safeguard duty to protect EU producers. The most recent change in the safeguard duty for white sugar was on 2 December 1998.

Kashmir Bee Virus

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the risk of import of Kashmir Bee virus through infected bee packages from New Zealand. [64250]

Mr. Rooker: The Central Science Laboratory's National Bee Unit is currently conducting a risk assessment exercise relating to the import of bees and specifically to the risk of introducing Kashmir Bee virus from New Zealand.

A decision on whether to allow the import of bee packages will not be taken until the results of this assessment are available.

Animal Products

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what powers the EU has under existing bilateral and multilateral trade agreements to enforce harmonised community rules in third countries. [64282]

Mr. Rooker: The World Trade Organisation (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures gives members, including the European Community, the right to take measures necessary for the protection of human, animal or plant life or health which are based on scientific principles and which do not arbitrarily or unjustifiably discriminate between members where identical or similar conditions prevail. The Community's import requirements for animal products, which seek to ensure that imports are produced to at least the same standard as Community production, are an example of such measures.

In accordance with the provisions on recognition of equivalence in the WTO Agreement, the Community has entered into specific bilateral agreements with certain third countries which formally recognise that their respective systems of sanitary measures are intended to provide similar health assurances. These agreements, such as the Agreement between the European Community and the USA on sanitary measures to protect public and animal health in trade in live animals and animal products, include provisions enabling both parties to verify compliance by way of on-site checks and inspections.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the occasions in the last 10 years when a guarantee offered by a third country with

regard to compliance with Community rules regarding the importation of fresh meat or meat products subsequently proved ineffective. [64285]

Mr. Rooker: This information is not available. However, figures provided by the European Commission on the checks carried out at Border Inspection Posts in 10 Member States in the first half of 1997 show that 3.69 per cent. of consignments of fresh meat, including offal, and meat products and 2.00 per cent. of poultry meat and poultry meat products were rejected on arrival. In the period 1 January to 30 September 1998, 1.5 per cent. of consignments of animal products of all types were rejected at UK Border Inspection Posts. Not all rejections are due to non-compliance with standards of production in the country of origin.

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons he has not abated the standard charge for Meat Hygiene Service services to abattoirs as provided for in the Council Directive 85/73/EEC (as amended). [64283]

Mr. Rooker: In appropriate cases, the Meat Hygiene Service abates the standard charge for hygiene inspections down to the level at which the actual costs of such inspections are recovered, subject to a maximum abatement of 55 per cent. in line with Directive 85/73/EEC (as amended).

Farm Bankruptcies

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers in England and Wales have been declared bankrupt since 1 January. [64294]

Mr. Rooker: Figures for bankruptcies in the agricultural sector are available for the first six months of 1998. These, together with the corresponding figures for 1997, are given in the table.

Bankruptcies in the agricultural and horticultural sectors (England and Wales)

	[1]*1998*	[1]*1997*
Bankruptcies of Self-employed Individuals	71	88
Company Insolvencies (including partnerships)	30	23
Total	101	111

[1] January-June
Source:
Department of Trade and Industry

Farm Subsidies

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the current arrangements for the payment in euros of CAP farm subsidies for those member states which are not adopting the single currency. [64634]

Mr. Rooker: The Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 14 and 15 December 1998 reached agreement on agrimonetary arrangements following the introduction of the Single Currency on 1 January 1999. As my right hon. Friend indicated in his answer of 26 October 1998, these arrangements include improved general provisions for those Member States not joining the Single Currency on 1 January 1999 to make CAP payments in euros. There are no detailed provisions; each Member State's proposed payment scheme would be subject to the European Commission's agreement.

My right hon. Friend announced on 12 November 1998 his intention to make available an option for payments of market support measures, such as export refunds and intervention buying, in euros by autumn 2000. No other Member State outside the single currency has so far announced its intention to make this option available.

My officials are now in the process of working out the detailed provisions for a euro payment scheme, which we will then discuss with the Commission.

Export Scheme Agreement

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what procedures are in place to ensure that EU inspectors visit the United Kingdom to complete the Date Based Export Scheme Agreement. [64495]

Mr. Rooker: Commission Decision 98/692/EC on the Date-based Export Scheme (DBES) requires the European Commission to carry out an inspection of the UK's procedures for implementing the provisions of the Scheme and progress with the offspring cull. If they are satisfied they will then set a date from which exports under the Scheme can begin. The Decision requires us first to have slaughtered offspring of BSE cases confirmed before 25 November 1998 (the date of adoption of the Decision). We have laid before Parliament the necessary legislation for the offspring cull and aim to have fulfilled the Decision requirement by the end of March.

Tallow

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made in encouraging EU inspectors to visit rendering plants to inspect the production of tallow in accordance with the Florence Agreement of 1996. [64494]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *663*.

Dead Stock

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he was to improve traceability of dead stock, with particular reference to that *(a)* buried on farms, *(b)* sold to knackers' yards and *(c)* given to hunts. [64496]

Mr. Rooker: There is no legal requirement for records to be kept of on-farm burial although the Water Code issued by the Department and the Welsh Office recommends that farmers should keep a field plan of the burial site and records of the dates of burial and the number and type of livestock buried.

Under the Animal By-Products Order 1992, as amended, anyone consigning fallen stock to a knacker's year or hunt kennel must keep a record of each consignment and ensure that identifying documentation accompanies it during transport. Knackers' yards and hunt kennels must also keep records of all incoming

consignments of carcases or parts of carcases and the use to which they were put. There are no proposals to alter these requirements.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 14 and 15 December; and if he will make a statement. [64491]

Mr. Nick Brown: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *661–62*.

Fisheries Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Fisheries Council held in Brussels on 17 and 18 December; and if he will make a statement. [65071]

Mr. Morley: I represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of the EU Fisheries Council in Brussels on 17 and 18 December. My noble Friends Lord Sewel, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Scottish Office, and Lord Dubs, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office, were also present.

The Council agreed unanimously, with Italy abstaining, the total allowable catches (TACs) and quotas to apply in 1999 in Community waters. Details of the final TACs are in the following table. In some cases, there are significant reductions compared with 1998; in other cases, the final figures are higher than the Commission's proposals or the 1998 TACs; in all cases, the UK sought a balance between the need to be cautious in the management of stocks for their long-term benefit and the need to take account of the practical realities for fishermen and short-term socio-economic pressures on them. At the end of the negotiations, the total UK quotas agreed were some 57,000 tonnes higher in cod equivalent terms than the quotas being discussed at the start of the negotiations. This increase is worth some £30 million to the industry, although overall there has been a net year-on-year reduction in fishing opportunities in order to conserve stocks for the future.

I invoked The Hague Preference on all the stocks where it was necessary to do so.

A particularly welcome part of the package was the securing of additional quota to catch haddock in the Irish Sea, reflecting the upsurge of fish in this area. As a result of close co-operation with the Irish Republic, we secured an additional 2,400 tonnes of quota for UK Irish Sea fishermen which will be especially beneficial in Northern Ireland.

We were also very pleased to secure as part of the package the separation of the small Shetland coastal sandeel fishery from the North Sea sandeel TAC and helpful Commission statements on two UK initiatives: a Commission commitment to propose the introduction of a new TAC for dogfish and a commitment to respond to concern about the effects of sandeel fishing on birds and other wildlife.

Separately from the main TACs package, the Council agreed by qualified majority, with Italy and Greece opposed, 1999 TACs for bluefin tuna and swordfish. These retain small unallocated quotas to cover incidental by-catches by the UK and other northern countries.

The Council agreed unanimously to eighteen regulations covering 1999 international fisheries arrangements: between the Community and Norway, Faroes, Greenland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland and Russia; and under the North West Atlantic Fisheries Organisation and the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission. These all reflected negotiations completed in the previous weeks and, in cases where the UK has a direct interest, safeguarded that interest.

Following the substantial progress made at its last meeting, the Council unanimously adopted a regulation amending fisheries control and enforcement rules. These will strengthen control arrangements throughout the fisheries sector in line with UK objectives, including more effective monitoring of Third Country vessels, improved transparency of enforcement activity, increased co-operation among Member States and reinforcement of the UK's national rules on designated ports.

The Council agreed by qualified majority, with Belgium, France and Spain voting against, some limited amendments to 1998 autonomous tariff quotas and tariff suspensions for 1999. These measures help to maintain the competitiveness of the processing industry by giving them access, at reduced rates of duty, to raw material that Community fishermen cannot supply.

Stock	*1998 TAC (tonnes)*	*1999 TAC (tonnes)*	*Gain/loss %*
Sandeels IIa, IV	1,000,000	1,000,000	0
Herring I,II	1,300,000	1,300,000	0
Herring IVa, b	229,000	240,000	5
Herring IVc, VIId	25,000	25,000	0
Herring Vb, VIaN,VIb	80,370	68,000	−15
Herring VIa (Clyde)	1,000	1,000	0
Herring VIIa	9,000	6,600	−27
Herring VIIe, f	1,000	1,000	0
Herring VIIg-k	22,200	21,000	−5
Herring IIa, IV Ind. by-catch	22,000	30,000	36
Cod IIa, IV	140,000	132,400	−5
Cod Vb, VI, XII, XIV	11,000	11,800	7
Cod VIIa	7,100	5,500	−23
Cod VIIb-k, VIII, IX, X	20,000	19,000	−5
Megrim IIa, IV	3,000	3,000	0
Megrim Vb, VI, XII, XIV	4,840	4,840	0
Megrim VII	22,400	22,400	0
Dab & Flounder IIa, IV	30,070	30,070	0
Anglers IIa, IV	22,070	22,070	0
Anglers Vb, VI, XII, XIV	8,600	8,600	0
Anglers VII	26,670	26,670	0
Haddock IIa, IV	115,000	88,550	−23
Haddock Vb, VI, XII, XIV	25,700	19,000	−26
Haddock VII, VIII, IX, X	20,000	22,000	10
Haddock VIIa	0	5,000	–
Whiting IIa, IV	60,000	44,000	−27
Whiting Vb, VI, XII, XIV	9,000	6,300	−30
Whiting VIIa	5,000	4,400	−12
Whiting VIIb-k	27,000	25,000	−7

Stock	1998 TAC (tonnes)	1999 TAC (tonnes)	Gain/loss %
Hake IIa, IV	2,070	1,930	–7
Hake Vb, VI, VII, XII, XIV	33,160	30,910	–7
Lemon sole & witch IIa, IV	12,000	12,000	0
Blue whiting IIa NS	90,000	90,000	0
Nephrops IIa, IV	15,200	15,200	0
Nephrops Vb, VI	12,600	12,600	0
Nephrops VII	23,000	23,000	0
Plaice IIa, IV	87,000	102,000	17
Plaice Vb, VI, XII, XIV	2,400	2,400	0
Plaice VIIa	2,400	2,400	0
Plaice VIId, e	5,700	7,400	30
Plaice VIIf, g	1,100	900	–18
Plaice VIIh,j,k	1,350	1,350	0
Pollack Vb, VI, XII, XIV	1,100	1,100	0
Pollack VII	17,000	17,000	0
Saithe IIa, IIIb,c,d, IV	97,000	110,000	13
Saithe Vb, VI, XII, XIV	10,900	7,500	–31
Saithe VII, VIII, IX, X	8,800	8,800	0
Turbot & brill IIa, IV	9,000	9,000	0
Skates & rays IIa, IV	6,060	6,060	0
Mackerel IIa(EC), III, IV	62,455	62,455	0
Mackerel IIa (non EC), Vb, VI, VII, VIIIabde, XII, XIV	422,160	422,160	0
Sole II, IV	19,100	22,000	15
Sole Vb, VI, XII XIV	155	155	0
Sole VIIa	900	900	0
Sole VIId	5,230	4,700	–10
Sole VIIe	670	700	4
Sole VIIf,g	850	960	13
Sole VIIh,j,k	720	720	0
Sprat IIa, IV	150,000	175,000	17
Sprat VIId,e	12,000	12,000	0
Horse mackerel IIa, IV	60,000	60,000	0
Horse mackerel Vb, VI, VII, VIIa,b,d,e, XII, XIV	320,000	265,000	–17

Meat and Livestock Commission

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of the Meat and Livestock Commission budget was spent on promoting British pork and bacon in each of the last three years. [65120]

Mr. Nick Brown: As a percentage of total expenditure, the proportion spent by the Meat and Livestock Commission on promoting British pork and bacon in each of the last three financial years is as set out. These amounts are equivalent to the pork and bacon promotion levy collected from pig producers.

Year	Percentage
1995–96	18
1996–97	16
1997–98 (prov.)	18

Mr. Ken James

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Parliamentary Secretary last met Mr. Ken James; and if he will make a statement. [64669]

Mr. Morley: I have not met Mr. James since the election.

New Forest Fox Hounds

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to send a substantive reply to the question from the hon. Member for New Forest, West of 30 November 1998 regarding New Forest fox hounds. [64740]

Mr. Morley: The Chief Executive wrote to the hon. Member on 16 December 1998.

Forest Enterprise

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish a minute of the meeting between the Parliamentary Secretary, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), and the Chief Executive of Forest Enterprise on 24 November 1998. [64979]

Mr. Morley: I often meet officials of the Forestry Commission, including the Chief Executive of Forest Enterprise, to discuss forestry matters. When I met the Chief Executive on 24 November he informed me, amongst other things, that Forest Enterprise had issued a formal warning to the New Forest Fox Hounds. It is not customary to publish the minutes of meetings between Ministers and their departmental officials.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the relationship between Forest Enterprise and the Parliamentary Secretary, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley). [65008]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend the Minister has responsibility for forestry in England, but I act on his behalf on most forestry matters. Forest Enterprise is an agency of the Forestry Commission, which is the Government's Department for forestry.

Maternal Transmissions

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of how many more animals will be included in the cull as a result of the addition of maternal transmissions. [64646]

Mr. Rooker: The selective cull, which removes cattle which have been exposed to BSE through contaminated feed, has been operating since January 1997. Since maternal transmission was confirmed as a possibility, a further cull has been initiated to slaughter offspring born after 1 August 1996 to confirmed BSE cases. This has operated on a voluntary basis since August 1998 and became compulsory on 4 January 1999. It has been estimated that, at most, 10,000 animals might need to be slaughtered under the arrangements. Inevitably, this estimate rests on assumptions about the future course of

the epidemic and the number of offspring found to be already dead. The final number may well be considerably less.

Before beef exports can resume under the Date Based Export Scheme, the UK must slaughter all living offspring born between 1 August 1996 and the date of the EC Decision on the DBES (25 November 1998) to confirmed BSE cases. This is likely to be at least 3,500 animals.

Agricultural Tenancies

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to reduce the disincentives to tenants from moving from Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 tenancies to farm business tenancies under the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. [64731]

Mr. Rooker: There are no plans to re-visit the agricultural holdings legislation. The Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 offers considerable flexibility for parties to negotiate farm business tenancies that best suit their respective interests.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many tenancies have been negotiated, in each year, since the coming into force of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. [64727]

Mr. Rooker: Precise information is not available. The Annual Survey of Tenanted Land is a sample survey and does not allow a definitive overall number of tenancies to be given. However, the results of a policy evaluation, conducted by the University of Plymouth in 1996 and published in January 1998, indicated that some 5,000 new tenancies had been created in the first year since the Act came into force.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what impact the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 has had on encouraging new entrants into the agricultural industry. [64729]

Mr. Rooker: A policy evaluation was conducted by the University of Plymouth in 1996 and its findings published in January 1998. This showed that some 5,000 tenancies were created in the first year of the Act, covering about 200,000 hectares of land. A copy of the report was placed in the House Library.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will amend the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 to allow landlords and tenants to agree that the provisions of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 will apply to the agricultural holding. [64732]

Mr. Rooker: There are no plans to amend the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. The flexibility available under the Act enables parties to tailor their tenancy agreements according to their respective needs. If they wish to do so, many features of a tenancy under the 1986 Act could be included.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he intends to review the operation of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. [64728]

Mr. Rooker: An independent policy evaluation was carried out in 1996 by the University of Plymouth. A copy of the report was placed in the Library of the House in January 1998. There are no immediate plans to carry out a further review.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what impact the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 has had on tenancy progressions on tenanted estates. [64730]

Mr. Rooker: Any policy of progression by tenants within individual estates is a matter for landlords. The Ministry has not conducted any specific survey into this matter, and has no plans to do so.

BSE

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many notifiable cases of BSE there have been per month in the last two years. [64644]

Mr. Rooker: Numbers of cattle notified as BSE suspects to Agriculture Departments in Great Britain during 1997 and 1998 are given by month in the following table. It should be noted that not all these cattle have subsequently been confirmed as having BSE.

Month of restriction	*Number of suspect cases*
1997	
January	538
February	501
March	521
April	523
May	447
June	432
July	450
August	454
September	412
October	460
November	427
December	442
1998	
January	459
February	403
March	436
April	384
May	325
June	334
July	343
August	307
September	322
October	372
November	314
December	288

Note:
Data as at 4 January 1998

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many prosecutions of farmers for breaches in BSE controls there have been; and if he will list the specific breaches. [64645]

Mr. Rooker: Since 1996, there have been 5 successful prosecutions of farmers for breaches of BSE controls brought by MAFF and the Intervention Board Executive Agency. In addition, we have been informed of a further 17 prosecutions undertaken by Local Authorities and by the Scottish Procurator Fiscal.

Offences include failure to keep proper records, incorrect tagging, failure to record cattle movements, false declarations relating to the BSE status of holdings, altering the date of birth of calves on movement and identification documents, forgery of cattle birth documents, failure to stain sheep heads and specified

bovine material, selling meat contrary to the Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (Nos. 2) Regulations 1996 and the Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations 1995, illegible cattle eartags, deception and false accounting under the Over 30 Month Scheme and various offences under the Animal by Products Order 1992, the Cattle Passports Order 1996 and the Trade Descriptions Act 1968.

Details of legal action on breaches of BSE controls are published each month in the BSE Enforcement Bulletin, copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his letter to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon of 30 November 1998 listing details of ministerial flights, if the average cost of flights taken refers to the average cost per passenger. [64734]

Mr. Nick Brown: The average cost refers to the average cost per trip and not average cost per passenger.

Hen Houses

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the research on the use of electric plates to purify air in hen houses; and what plans he has to introduce a similar system in the United Kingdom. [64844]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry is aware of the research, most of which has been carried out in the United States over the last 15 years. The electric plate technique has some limitations and is not widely used in the UK. Other methods for controlling dust, such as misting systems, are beginning to be introduced into the UK broiler industry.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 12 January 1999

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British Library

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what requirements are placed on senior staff of the British Library to disclose shareholdings and other financial interests in the annual report of the Library. [63365]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* There are no requirements on senior staff at the British Library to publish these details in the Library's annual report. However, the Library holds a Register of Business Interests in which all staff are required to provide details of relevant financial interests or other relevant material benefit which they receive from sources external to the Library and which might be perceived as a conflict of interest.

Art Collections

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those public art galleries and museums which allow items from their collections to be displayed in *(a)* hotels and *(b)* other places where the general public does not have an automatic right of access. [64493]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Although we are aware that some museums and galleries lend items from their collections outside the museums community, we have no means of knowing all that do so: it is for the governing body of each museum and gallery to determine their own policy on loans of works of art or objects. The governing body will want to be satisfied as to the level of public access to the display.

BBC (Funding)

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will announce the membership of the panel looking at the future funding of the BBC; and if he will make a statement. [65562]

Mr. Chris Smith: The panel will be chaired by Gavyn Davies and comprises the right hon. Lord Newton of Braintree, Lord Gordon of Strathblane, Sir Alan Budd, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, Helen Black, Ruth Evans, David Lipsey and Heather Rabbatts.

This is an important review which aims to ensure the BBC's continuing ability to meet its public service obligations effectively, while, at the same time, ensuring that it retains the ability to operate effectively in a competitive marketplace.

I am pleased that Gavyn Davies has accepted my invitation to chair the panel. The panel members have the knowledge, authority and judgment to weigh the issues, and I am confident that they will do so impartially, without preconceptions and with the national interest in mind.

The panel will be announcing shortly how it intends to take the review forward, including the taking of evidence.

The panel will report to me by the end of July and I will then consult on its findings.

WALES

Football Association

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the Chairman of the Sports Council for Wales concerning the receipt by the Football Association of Wales of a grant from the English Football Association and the conditions attached thereto; and if he will make a statement. [64987]

Mr. Michael: I have had no consultations with the Sports Council for Wales on this issue. It is entirely a matter for the two governing bodies involved.

Finance

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate aggregate Government spending in Wales in each year between 1992–93 and 2001–02. [64502]

Mr. Michael: Identifiable General Government Expenditure in Wales between 1992–93 and 1996–97 is as shown:

	£ million
1992–93	11,438
1993–94	12,069
1994–95	12,556
1995–96	12,985
1996–97	13,496

Source:
Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses

These figures include all General Government Expenditure that can be identified as being within Wales, but excludes items from which Wales may benefit even though the money is spent elsewhere (eg defence spending).

A substantial part of identifiable General Government Expenditure consists of social security payments which form part of the new Annually Managed Expenditure total, for which forward allocations to the year 2001–02 are not available. The Welsh budget (a substantially smaller sum than identifiable General Government Expenditure) which includes the Departmental Expenditure Limit and Annually Managed Expenditure for the years 1998–99 to 2001 02 is as shown.

	£ million
1998–99	7,411.9
1999–2000	7,812.1
2000–01	8,223.4
2001–02	8,665.5

Note also that identifiable Government Expenditure (IGE) in Wales is not directly comparable with IGE in English regions—because some items can be identified in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but not at a regional level within England.

Estimates of all Government Expenditure for Wales, including an appropriate share of UK defence spending and other such items, were made in Government Expenditure and Revenue, Wales 1993–94 and 1994–95. These estimates were:

	£ million
1998–99	7,411.9
1999–2000	7,812.1
2000–01	8,223.4
2001–02	8,665.5

No estimates have been made for later years.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate Government revenues derived from sources in Wales in each year between 1992–93 and 2001–02. [64501]

Mr. Michael: "Government Expenditure and Revenue, Wales 1993–94 and 1994–95", available in the Library of the House, gives the following estimates:

1993–94: £9.3 billion

1994–95: £9.9 billion.

No estimates are available for other years.

Bedlinog Schools

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will list the dates of the visits by the office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools to Bedlinog Junior, Bedlinog Infants and Graig Bedlinog Infants schools to advise on the exercise of his powers under sections 35(1) and 167(1) of the Education Act 1996; [64769]

(2) if he will list the dates upon which his professional advisers on school building visited Bedlinog Infants, Bedlinog Junior and Graig Bedlinog Infants schools in consideration of the exercise of his powers under sections 35(1) and 167(1) of the Education Act 1996. [64768]

Mr. Hain: Since Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's proposal to amalgamate the three Bedlinog schools on the site of the existing junior school attracted statutory objections, in accordance with sections 37 and 169 of the Education Act 1996, it fell to the Secretary of State to determine.

In considering the proposal the Secretary of State sought the views of the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales (OHMCI) and the Department's professional advisers on school building matters—Burgess Partnership.

Bedlinog Junior, Bedlinog Infants and Graig Bedlinog Infants schools were inspected by independent inspectors under contract to OHMCI on 10–12 June 1996, 23–25 September 1996, and 4–6 March 1996 respectively. Given the generally satisfactory standards of achievement in the three schools, visits by HMI were not deemed necessary following the inspections. OHMCI provided the Department with advice on the educational merits of the LEA's proposal having considered the LEA's statement of case and all the objections.

The Burgess Partnership did not visit the schools but assessed the LEA's technical report on the condition of the junior school building and the authority's response to objections relating to this particular issue. Their assessment was reported to the Secretary of State for his consideration along with all other evidence.

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what estimate he has made of each of the current class sizes in *(a)* Bedlinog Junior, *(b)* Bedlinog Infants and *(c)* Graig Bedlinog Infants schools, Merthyr Tydfil; and what estimate he has made of each of these class sizes following the proposed reorganisation of the schools; [64771]

(2) what estimate he has made of the teacher/pupil ratios at *(a)* Bedlinog Junior, *(b)* Bedlinog Infants and *(c)* Graig Bedlinog Infants schools; and what estimate he has made of the pupil/teacher ratio after the proposed reorganisation of the schools. [64770]

Mr. Hain: The following table provides details of class sizes and pupil-teacher ratios at each of the three schools at September 1998.

The determination of class sizes and pupil-teacher ratios following the reorganisation of the schools will be matters for the head teacher and governing body. The school is expected to have around 162 pupils and 6 teachers.

Bedlinog schools—class sizes and pupil-teacher ratios—September 1998

School	*Class sizes* *Class*	*Number of pupils*	*Number of teachers*	*Pupil-Teacher ratio*
Bedlinog Infants	N/R	18		
	R/Y1/Y2	22		
	Total	40	[1]2	20:1
Graig Bedlinog Infant	N/R/Y1	23		
	Y1/Y2	21		
	Total	44	[1]2.1	20.95:1
Bedlinog Junior	Yrs 3–6	25		
		26		
		25		
	Total	76	[2]3.8	20:1

[1] Including Head teacher

[2] Head teacher teaches for 80 per cent. of his time

NORTHERN IRELAND

Punishment Beatings

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for the weeks ending (i) 19 December 1998, (ii) 26 December 1998, (iii) 2 January 1999 and (iv) 9 January 1999 the number of *(a)* punishment beatings and *(b)* shootings which took place in Northern Ireland; and how many in each category were committed by (1) Loyalists and (2) Republicans. [64212]

Mr. Ingram: The following table shows the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks for the period 13 December 1998 to 9 January 1999.

Date	*Shootings*		*Assaults*	
	By Loyalist	*By Republican*	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*
13 December to 19 December	2	1	1	1
20 December to 26 December	0	0	1	0
27 December to 2 January	0	0	0	1
03 January to 9 January	1	2	6	5
Total	3	3	8	7

Note:
Statistics may be subject to minor amendment

TREASURY

Winter Deaths

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the excess winter deaths for each region within Great Britain for the last three years, and the forecasts for *(a)* this winter, *(b)* 1999–2000 and *(c)* 2000–01; and if he will list the estimated cost to the NHS as a result. [63411]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Rendel, dated 12 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the excess winter deaths for each region within Great Britain for each of the last three years, and the forecasts for (a) this winter, (b) 1999–2000 and (c) 2000–2001; and the estimated cost to the NHS as a result.

The number of excess winter deaths in each region within Great Britain over the last three winters is given in the table below.

Excess winter deaths by region, Great Britain, 1995–96 to [1]1997–98

Region	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*[1]1997–98*
North	2,490	2,620	1,800
Yorkshire and Humberside	4,040	4,550	2,510
East Midlands	2,930	3,540	2,050
East Anglia	1,600	2,140	1,080
South East	13,240	16,450	7,320
South West	4,140	5,060	2,270
West Midlands	4,160	4,530	2,490
North West	5,220	5,960	2,650
Wales	2,440	2,880	1,330
Scotland	3,660	3,640	2,740

[1] Provisional

The ONS defines excess winter mortality as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average of the number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

It is not possible to forecast the figures for future winters as excess winter mortality is influenced by many factors such as temperature and the incidence of influenza which cannot be predicted.

Information on the estimated cost to the NHS is not collected by the ONS or the Department of Health.

Birth Statistics

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will state the percentage of low birthweight live births in each English health authority area broken down by *(a)* single and *(b)* all live births for the last three years. [64413]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 12 January 1997:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on low birthweight live births.

The information requested is shown in the attached table.

Percentage of (a) all live births and (b) singleton live births: with a stated birthweight less than 2,500g England, regional offices and health authorities, 1995–1997

Percentage

	1995		*1996*		*1997*	
	All babies less than 2,500g	*Singletons less than 2,500g*	*All babies less than 2,500g*	*Singletons less than 2,500g*	*All babies less than 2,500g*	*Singletons less than 2,500g*
England	7.3	6.0	7.3	6.0	7.5	6.1
Northern and Yorkshire	7.7	6.4	7.4	6.1	7.9	6.5
Bradford HA	8.8	7.7	8.7	7.6	9.1	8.0
County Durham HA	7.3	5.8	7.2	5.8	7.8	6.1
East Riding HA	6.9	5.7	7.5	6.2	8.2	6.6

Percentage of (a) all live births and (b) singleton live births: with a stated birthweight less than 2,500g England, regional offices and health authorities, 1995–1997

Percentage

	1995		1996		1997	
	All babies less than 2,500g	*Singletons less than 2,500g*	*All babies less than 2,500g*	*Singletons less than 2,500g*	*All babies less than 2,500g*	*Singletons less than 2,500g*
Gateshead and South Tyneside HA	7.9	6.5	7.4	6.3	8.1	6.9
Leeds HA	8.5	6.8	8.1	6.6	8.2	6.9
Newcastle and North Tyneside HA	7.7	6.4	7.9	6.7	8.3	6.7
North Cumbria HA	6.6	5.3	7.0	5.4	7.5	5.6
Northumberland HA	7.3	6.2	6.0	5.1	7.1	5.5
Sunderland HA	7.6	6.5	8.0	6.6	8.1	6.7
Tees HA	7.8	6.4	7.3	6.4	7.6	6.5
Wakefield HA	7.9	6.7	7.6	5.8	7.9	6.5
North Yorkshire HA	6.5	5.0	5.5	4.4	6.6	4.9
Calderdale and Kirklees HA	8.7	7.5	7.7	6.1	8.4	7.0
Trent	7.3	6.0	7.3	5.9	7.6	6.2
Barnsley HA	7.6	6.7	6.6	5.7	6.9	5.6
North Derbyshire HA	5.9	4.5	6.1	4.9	6.5	5.2
South Derbyshire HA	6.5	5.3	6.9	5.7	7.0	5.7
Doncaster HA	7.5	6.4	6.8	5.5	8.8	7.1
Leicestershire HA	8.0	6.4	8.2	6.7	8.2	6.8
Lincolnshire HA	6.4	5.1	6.2	5.1	6.8	5.6
North Nottinghamshire HA	8.0	6.5	8.0	6.4	8.9	6.8
Nottingham HA	7.5	6.0	7.4	5.8	7.2	5.9
Rotherham HA	8.0	7.0	7.1	6.1	7.3	6.1
Sheffield HA	7.9	6.5	7.9	6.5	7.7	6.4
South Humber HA	7.1	5.9	7.0	5.6	7.5	6.2
Anglia and Oxford	6.8	5.3	6.9	5.5	7.0	5.6
Bedfordshire HA	6.7	5.5	7.3	5.9	7.2	6.0
Berkshire HA	6.9	5.4	6.8	5.3	7.1	5.5
Buckinghamshire HA	6.8	5.3	6.7	5.5	7.2	5.5
Cambridge and Huntingdon HA	6.8	5.2	6.5	5.0	6.2	5.2
East Norfolk HA	7.3	5.7	6.7	5.4	6.7	5.1
Northamptonshire HA	7.0	5.6	7.5	5.9	7.7	6.2
North West Anglia HA	7.6	6.3	7.8	6.3	7.4	6.1
Oxfordshire HA	5.7	4.3	6.2	4.9	6.3	5.0
Suffolk HA	6.3	4.9	6.5	5.3	6.9	5.5
North Thames	7.5	6.1	7.4	6.1	7.6	6.2
Hillingdon HA	8.3	6.4	7.2	5.9	7.5	5.9
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminister HA	7.8	6.2	7.7	5.5	7.6	5.7
Enfield and Haringey HA	7.9	6.6	7.7	6.3	8.2	7.0
Redbridge and Waltham Forest HA	8.3	6.8	7.9	6.4	8.0	6.3
Barking and Havering HA	6.2	4.9	6.8	5.5	7.4	5.7
Barnet HA	7.8	6.3	7.5	6.2	7.9	6.2
Brent and Harrow HA	8.6	7.4	9.0	7.6	8.7	7.9
Camden and Islington HA	7.4	6.6	7.5	6.8	7.8	6.7
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow HA	7.7	6.3	7.7	6.5	7.8	6.2
East London and The City HA	9.0	7.7	8.9	8.0	9.7	8.6
North Essex HA	6.5	4.9	6.3	5.1	6.2	4.9
South Essex HA	5.7	4.5	5.9	4.4	6.6	5.1
East and North Hertfordshire HA	6.8	5.3	6.5	5.1	6.6	5.0
West Hertfordshire HA	6.5	5.1	6.9	5.4	6.0	4.6
South Thames	7.0	5.6	6.9	5.6	7.0	5.5
Bexley and Greenwich HA	6.9	5.6	7.4	6.1	7.3	6.0
Bromley HA	6.9	5.5	6.9	5.4	6.4	5.0
Croydon HA	8.3	6.3	7.8	6.4	7.9	6.2
East Kent HA	6.7	5.3	6.2	5.0	7.4	5.7
West Kent HA	6.7	5.4	6.6	5.2	6.3	5.1
Kingston and Richmond HA	5.7	4.0	5.9	4.6	6.2	4.8
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham HA	9.1	7.7	8.7	7.6	8.8	7.3
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth HA	7.1	5.5	6.9	5.3	6.7	5.3
East Surrey HA	6.5	4.6	6.3	4.8	5.8	4.5
West Surrey HA	6.4	4.8	5.7	4.6	6.2	4.5
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove HA	6.4	5.4	6.7	5.4	7.1	5.5
West Sussex HA	6.6	5.2	6.4	5.1	6.8	5.3
South and West	6.7	5.4	6.8	5.4	6.7	5.3
North and Mid Hampshire HA	6.2	4.6	7.2	5.4	6.2	4.7
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire HA	6.9	5.4	6.7	5.3	6.4	4.9
Southampton and South West Hampshire HA	7.1	5.8	6.8	5.7	6.6	5.5
Isle of Wight HA	6.5	4.6	7.1	5.6	7.3	6.3
Somerset HA	6.5	5.3	6.7	5.2	6.4	5.2
South West Devon HA	6.6	5.6	6.7	5.5	7.4	6.2
Wiltshire HA	7.0	5.7	6.6	5.4	7.4	5.6
Avon HA	6.8	5.6	7.0	5.4	7.0	5.6
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly HA	6.8	5.4	6.7	5.5	5.8	4.6

Percentage of (a) all live births and (b) singleton live births: with a stated birthweight less than 2,500g England, regional offices and health authorities, 1995–1997

Percentage

	1995		1996		1997	
	All babies less than 2,500g	*Singletons less than 2,500g*	*All babies less than 2,500g*	*Singletons less than 2,500g*	*All babies less than 2,500g*	*Singletons less than 2,500g*
Dorset HA	6.3	5.1	6.5	5.2	6.8	5.4
North East Devon HA	6.7	5.3	6.9	5.6	6.3	4.9
Gloucestershire HA	6.9	5.5	6.5	5.1	6.8	5.2
West Midlands	8.0	6.7	8.1	6.7	8.2	6.7
Birmingham HA	9.5	8.2	9.2	7.7	9.4	8.0
Coventry HA	8.7	7.5	9.7	7.9	8.7	7.0
Dudley HA	7.9	6.4	8.5	6.8	8.3	6.3
Herefordshire HA	6.4	5.2	6.8	6.2	6.9	6.0
Sandwell HA	9.7	8.3	9.5	8.1	10.0	8.9
Shropshire HA	7.1	5.5	7.0	5.5	6.7	5.5
Solihull HA	6.6	5.1	8.5	6.1	7.2	5.7
North Staffordshire HA	7.1	6.0	7.4	6.2	7.0	5.8
South Staffordshire HA	6.6	5.3	7.0	5.2	6.5	5.0
Walsall HA	8.8	7.5	9.1	7.7	10.1	8.1
Warwickshire HA	6.9	5.5	6.3	4.9	6.7	5.3
Wolverhampton HA	9.2	8.2	9.6	8.6	10.1	8.5
Worcestershire HA	7.1	5.6	6.6	5.5	7.2	5.7
North West	7.7	6.4	7.7	6.4	7.8	6.6
South Lancashire HA	6.4	5.1	6.9	5.9	7.0	5.5
Liverpool HA	8.3	6.9	8.5	7.1	7.7	6.7
Manchester HA	9.9	8.5	9.2	8.2	9.2	8.0
Morecambe Bay HA	7.4	5.9	7.3	6.2	6.2	5.2
St. Helen's and Knowsley HA	7.9	6.7	8.0	6.7	8.1	6.9
Salford and Trafford HA	8.0	6.6	7.8	6.4	8.3	6.8
Sefton HA	7.1	5.5	7.2	6.0	7.6	5.9
Stockport HA	6.9	5.5	6.3	5.1	6.1	4.5
West Pennine HA	7.8	6.7	7.6	6.7	8.4	7.5
Bury and Rochdale HA	8.3	7.1	8.2	6.9	8.6	7.4
North Cheshire HA	5.5	4.7	6.6	4.8	6.2	5.2
South Cheshire HA	6.5	5.0	6.4	5.1	6.6	5.6
East Lancashire HA	8.7	7.5	7.7	6.9	8.3	7.0
North West Lancashire HA	7.1	6.0	7.6	6.5	8.1	6.8
Wigan and Bolton HA	8.2	7.0	8.3	6.9	8.7	7.5
Wirral HA	6.6	5.6	7.6	5.6	7.0	5.7

Source:
ONS

Pre-Budget Report

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what reasons underlie the deduction of income tax credits from the figure for net taxes and social security contributions in Table B9 of the Pre-Budget report, Cmnd 4076. [64639]

Ms Hewitt: Income tax reliefs such as MIRAS and other tax credits, including the Working Families Tax Credit, are part of the income tax system and are administered by Inland Revenue. As they reduce the receipts of Inland Revenue, they are netted off the figures for total tax receipts and social security contributions.

EC Budget

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the United Kingdom's gross contribution to the EC budget for the latest available year was comprised of the proceeds of *(a)* agricultural levies and *(b)* customs duties; and what were the corresponding figures for the latest available years for (i) France, (ii) Germany and (iii) Italy. [64642]

Ms Hewitt: The percentages for the traditional own resources contributions of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy in respect of calendar year 1997 are set out in the table.

Percentage

	Duties on agricultural products (formerly agricultural levies)	*Sugar and Isoglucose levies*	*Customs duties*
United Kingdom	3.25	0.76	22.73
France	0.45	2.19	9.64
Germany	0.73	1.35	14.49
Italy	0.53	1.06	12.01

Notes:
1. Source of figures: the European Court of Auditors report on the 1997 EC Budget.
2. Percentages relate to the Member States gross contributions, less traditional own resources collection costs, before account is taken of the UK's abatement. The gross contribution figures include adjustments to VAT and GNP contributions of earlier years.

PRIME MINISTER

Mr. Dominic Lawson

Mr. Galloway: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list the capacities in which Mr. Dominic Lawson has been employed by Her Majesty's Government or any agency acting on their behalf; and if he will make a statement; [64972]

(2) what public funds have been paid by Her Majesty's Government or anyone acting on their behalf into a bank or banks to Mr. Dominic Lawson; for what purposes; and if he will make a statement. [64973]

The Prime Minister: None.

Teenage Pregnancies

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the Prime Minister when the Social Exclusion Unit will publish its report on, and recommendations for, reducing the numbers of teenage pregnancies. [64832]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *16–17*.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Paice: To ask the Prime Minister what is his policy towards the use of air miles awarded to Ministers who travel on official business paid for by public funds. [65072]

The Prime Minister: Paragraph 82 of the Ministerial Code makes clear that Air Miles and other benefits earned through travel paid for from public funds, other than where there are de minimis (for example, access to special departure lounges or booking arrangements which go with membership of regular flier clubs), should be used only for official purposes or else forgone. However, if it is impracticable to use the benefits for Government travel, there is no objection to Ministers donating them to charity if this is permissible under the terms of the airline's scheme and the charity is one chosen by the airline.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *459*, on ministerial visits to Latin America, if he will list the *(a)* 12 countries referred to and *(b)* the Ministers concerned. [64736]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The information is as follows:

Argentina
- Lord Clinton Davis
- Baroness Blackstone
- Tony Lloyd MP
- The Right Hon. John Prescott MP
- Glenda Jackson, CBE, MP

Belize
- Tony Lloyd MP

Brazil
- Barbara Roche MP
- Tony Lloyd MP
- Baroness Blackstone
- The Right Hon. Peter Mandelson MP
- Lord Clinton Davies
- George Foulkes MP
- Nick Raynsford MP

Chile
- Lord Clinton Davis
- Tony Lloyd MP

Columbia
- Tony Lloyd MP
- George Foulkes MP
- The Right Hon. Nick Brown MP
- Brian Wilson MP

Costa Rica
- Tony Lloyd MP

Ecuador
- The Right Hon. Nick Brown MP

El Salvador
- Tony Lloyd MP

Guatemala
- Tony Lloyd MP

Mexico
- The Right Hon. John Morris QC, MP
- Tony Lloyd MP (x2)

Panama
- The Right Hon. Robin Cook MP

Uruguay
- Tony Lloyd MP.

In addition, Tony Lloyd MP is returning from a visit to Peru today.

All visits were in accordance with the rules set out in the ministerial code.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the ministerial visits undertaken to each South American and Caribbean country since 1997. [64823]

The Prime Minister: Ministers have made a number of visits to the countries of South America and the Caribbean since 1 May 1997 to strengthen our bilateral relations, promote British interests and play our leading role in international affairs.

For the visits to South America I refer the hon. Member to the answer I have given today to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson).

The information for Caribbean countries is as follows:

Bahamas
- The Right Hon. Robin Cook MP
- Baroness Symons
- George Foulkes MP

Barbados
- The Right Hon. Clare Short MP
- George Foulkes MP
- The Right Hon. Frank Dobson MP

Cuba
- Baroness Symons
- Brian Wilson MP

Grenada
- George Foulkes

Guyana
- The Right Hon. Clare Short MP

Jamaica
- Baroness Symons
- The Right Hon. Michael Meacher MP

Trinidad
- Baroness Symons.

EU (Nuclear Safety)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the measures proposed under paragraph 67 of the presidency conclusions of the Vienna European Council in respect of nuclear safety in the context of enlargement of the European Union. [64815]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom has a strong interest in ensuring the candidates for European Union membership apply adequate safety standards. The Conclusions of the 7–8 December General Affairs Council on nuclear safety in the context of enlargement, welcomed by Vienna, stress the need for the candidates to attain internationally accepted levels of safety as part of their pre-accession strategies and to meet commitments they have already made in this sector.

The EU is already helping the candidates improve nuclear safety levels and to deal with the cost of early plant closure. This assistance will continue within the overall context of pre-accession assistance set out by the Accession partnerships, which are themselves due for revision later this year.

Iraq

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Prime Minister to what extent each of his objectives in undertaking the bombing of Iraq jointly with the United States of America in December has been met; and on what basis he will consider undertaking similar attacks in future. [65281]

The Prime Minister: The objectives of Operation Desert Fox were to reduce Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and other military capabilities, and Iraq's ability to threaten its neighbours. We are ready to use force again if necessary, and will do so if Iraq tries to reconstitute its weapons of mass destruction or threatens its neighbours.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he has had with the French Government about the consequences for his policy of establishing a separate European defence identity of the American and British military action against Iraq. [65380]

The Prime Minister: None. We have, of course, briefed the French and our other EU partners on our recent actions in Iraq. The reasons for these are well understood.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what response he gave to representations from the Government of Italy concerning the attack on Iraq. [65379]

The Prime Minister: I briefed Prime Minister D'Alema on our current thinking on Iraq on 18 December 1998 and we agreed to keep in touch on the issue.

Sure Start Strategy

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements he proposes to make for the parliamentary accountability of the Sure Start strategy. [65651]

The Prime Minister: Sure Start is a vital element in the Government's work to improve services and other support for young children and their families. We have committed £540 million over the next three years, including £452 million in England, to achieving Sure Start's objectives. Sure Start is an interdepartmental strategy, and its success will require active partnership within Government and a continuing commitment to innovation. I want the arrangements for securing Parliamentary accountability for Sure Start both to be clear and to underline these principles.

I have therefore decided that, in England:

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will take the lead on Sure Start within the Cabinet, while my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health will have day-to-day responsibility for the policy and will chair the interdepartmental steering group of Ministers and officials which will take it forward and monitors progress;

a new interdepartmental Sure Start Unit, based in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), will run the programme at official level, with its terms of reference and targets set by the steering group. Ms Naomi Eisenstadt, currently Chief Executive of Family Service Units, will take up her appointment as the head of the Sure Start shortly;

subject to approval of the necessary Estimate, Sure Start expenditure for England will be carried on its own Vote. The Head of the Sure Start Unit will be an additional Accounting Officer within the DfEE. As is usual, the appointment as additional Accounting Officer will be made by the Treasury and a copy of the letter of appointment, setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of the additional Accounting Officer and the Permanent Secretary of the DfEE as Principal Accounting Officer, will be sent to the Comptroller and Auditor General and to the Clerk of the Committee of Public Accounts;

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will be the Minister ultimately answerable to Parliament for Sure Start. But my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health will normally answer Parliamentary Questions on Sure Start in this House, and in the case of Oral Questions will do so during DfEE Question Time. The Government expect that the relevant Select Committees will normally wish to invite her to appear when they examine Sure Start. My noble friend the Baroness Hollis of Heigham, a member of the Sure Start steering group, will answer for the Government in another place.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Public Health is writing today to the Chairman of the Committee for Public Accounts and the Chairmen of the Select Committees for Health and for Education and Employment, and the Government will liaise as necessary with the House authorities, to ensure that these arrangements work well and secure effective accountability for this innovative policy.

My right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales are accountable to Parliament for Sure Start and equivalent programmes in Scotland and Wales respectively.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

GCHQ

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Government plan to respond to the representations made on behalf of the 14 staff dismissed from GCHQ for refusing to give up their trades union membership. [65653]

Mr. Robin Cook: After discussions with the Council of Civil Service Unions and the TUC, I have decided to offer compensation for lost pension rights to the 14 staff dismissed from GCHQ for retaining their membership of the national Civil Service trades unions.

This decision reflects the principled stand which the 14 trade unionists took, to the point of dismissal, against the attempt to take away their basic trades union rights.

The additional pensions benefits will be provided through a special scheme under the Superannuation Act 1972, which will be laid before Parliament once the details have been finalised.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62806]

Mr. Mudie: As the information asked for is lengthy, it has been placed in the Library.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63924]

Mr. Mudie: The figures for total expenditure by the Department since May 1997, in each of the categories stated above are as follows:

Public Opinion Research

May 1997 until present: £1,073,681.00

Television, Radio and Newspaper Advertising

May 1997 until present

TV: £1,760,198

Radio: £2,219,211

Press: £4,480,116

Total: £8,459,525

Direct Mail

May 1997 until present £25,084.

Therefore the total spend on research, advertising and direct mail for the period May 1997 until present is £9,558,290 or an average of £477,914 per month.

This compares with a total spend on research, advertising and direct mail for the previous financial year 1996–97 of £7,172,497 or an average of £597,708 per month.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the term average cost in respect of the costs of travel by Ministers in his Department in RAF and privately chartered aircraft refers to the average cost per passenger. [64775]

Mr. Mudie: No. The average cost refers to the average cost per trip and not the average cost per passenger.

Local Authority Education Authorities (Chair)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list all the local authority education authorities specifying in respect of each whether the chair of education is a man or a woman. [65316]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected by my Department.

Millennium Bug Busters

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if Millennium bug busters who have completed a subsidised training course have an obligation to work in the United Kingdom. [64821]

Mr. Mudie: There is no requirement for Bug Buster trainees to work in the UK after they have completed their training.

Foundation Courses

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will review the position of students who are required to attend a foundation course before taking up a university place who currently receive no grant for the year of their foundation course. [63358]

Mr. Mudie: Current legislation restricts mandatory awards to courses leading to a first degree, HND, DipHE and to courses of initial teacher training. We have decided broadly to carry forward this position for the new student support arrangements which are being introduced for the 1999–2000 academic year. However, students on foundation courses in further education will be eligible to apply for assistance through the new further education student support arrangements which will be introduced in September.

DEFENCE

RN Hospital Haslar

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what non-military organisations currently use the RN Hospital Haslar site; [65298]

(2) what investment has taken place in medical facilities at the RN Hospital Haslar in each of the last 10 years; [65300]

(3) what discussions he had with the non-MoD users of the RN Hospital Haslar concerning his proposals for the hospital; [65299]

(4) how many *(a)* doctors and *(b)* nurses are employed at RN Hospital Haslar; and what are their specialisms. [65301]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Secondary Care Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from C. G. Callow to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 12 January 1999:

I am replying to your Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning a number of issues at the Royal Hospital Haslar. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Secondary Care Agency.

Your Questions and my responses are as follows:

What discussions has the Secretary of State for Defence had with non-MOD users of RH Haslar?

Staffs in the SDR Implementation Team and from this Agency have spent some time discussing our proposals in detail with our colleagues in the NHS. In particular, they worked closely with the Portsmouth Health Authority and the Portsmouth Hospitals Trust. In addition, they have also consulted the NHS Executive through the MOD/NHS Liaison Group.

The local population, including official bodies, will be consulted fully when the Portsmouth Health Authority present publicly their plans for the provision of secondary health care in the area.

What non-military organisations currently use RH Haslar?

Presently we have Gardner Merchant, Lasercare, NAAFI, Hampshire County Council, The League of Friends and Radio Haslar on the site.

In addition, Portsmouth Health Authority, local GP Fundholding practices and other NHS referral agents provide patients.

How many doctors and nurses are employed at RH Haslar and what are their specialisms?

Our current records show the following strength details, including attachments:

	RN	*Army*	*RAF*	*Civilian*	*Total*
Doctors					
A&E	0	0	0	1	1
Surgery	3	3	2	2	10
Anaesthetics	6	4	4	4	18
Medicine	8	3	5	2	18
ENT	2	0	1	0	3
Orthopaedics	4	1	1	1	7
Radiology	2	2	2	1	7
Pathology	1	1	4	4	10
Max Fax	2	1	2	0	5
Opthalmology	1	0	0	1	2
R&R	0	0	0	0	0
Psychiatry	1	0	0	2	3
Obs & Gynae	0	0	0	0	0
Paediatrics	1	1	0	0	2
Nuclear	0	0	0	2	2
Urology	0	0	0	1	1
Civ. Med. Practitioner	0	0	0	1	1
Specialist Registrars	0	7	3	0	10
Sen. House Officers	9	18	6	0	33
Pre. Reg. House Officers	10	12	0	0	22
Total	50	53	30	22	155
Nurses	87	129	92	67	375

What investment has taken place in medical facilities at RH Haslar?

During the financial year 1997–98 capital expenditure of £0.939 million was incurred at the Hospital. This covered majored items of medical equipment, building projects, computer systems and vehicles such as ambulances. Unfortunately, prior to that year, it is not possible to separate accurately capital expenditure from the hospital's day-to-day running costs. However, we estimate that capital expenditure costs were approximately:

	£ million
1996–97	13.6
1995–96	7.8
1994–95	2.6
1993–94	3.0
1992–93	1.7
1991–92	1.7
1990–91	1.7
1989–90	1.6
1988–89	1.6

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the key targets for 1998–99 for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. [65478]

Mr. Spellar: Consistent with Treasury requirements, DERA is required to achieve a 6 per cent. return on capital employed.

The Agency is required to keep any increase in the hourly manpower rates charged to MOD customers below the annual rise in the Retail Price Index. These manpower rates include overheads and depreciation but not direct contract costs.

DERA will seek to increase income from work for non-MOD customers from the £106 million achieved in 1997–98 to £122 million in 1998–99.

DERA will seek to increase the number of staff elected as Fellows of professional bodies by 10 per cent. from a baseline of 126 at the end of 1997–98 to 139 in 1998–99.

DERA is required to achieve on time 90 per cent. of the agreed milestones on work for MOD customers.

DERA has been set the target of maintaining at least the same score as last year, 655 points out of a possible 1,000, for overall satisfaction in the core questions in the annual customer satisfaction survey and, because of the particular significance of project management skills in the efficient delivery of scientific programmes, to achieve an improvement of 5 per cent. in the score for project management, from 596 points to 626, in the same survey.

DERA will seek to increase the value of its contribution to projects jointly funded by DERA and industry by 10 per cent. from £38.3 million to £42.1 million. DERA will seek to achieve, over a period of 3 years, a 20 per cent. increase in the number of articles that appear in scientific and technical publications and which are subjected to scrutiny and validation by a panel of experts. Under this target, the increase would be from 4.8 publications to 5.8 publications per 100 professionals in DERA, with professionals being defined as all those staff who have a scientific, technical or other specialist background or training.

DERA is required to increase by 50 per cent., from 16 to 24, over a period of three years, the number of its scientific teams that achieve the rating of "world-class" in DERA's technical assessment exercise. The latter involves both internal assessment and validation by outside experts form academia, industry and MOD.

Royal Green Jackets

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions in the last year the Royal Green Jackets have hosted breakfasts for charities or other organisations; and if he will list the organisations concerned. [64761]

Mr. Spellar: The Royal Green Jackets have not hosted breakfasts for any charitable or other organisation in the last year.

Defence Intelligence and Security Centre

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre for 1998–99. [65635]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The role of the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre is to train the Armed Forces and other Intelligence agencies in intelligence and security disciplines and conduct after capture; to maintain an operational capability; and to contribute to effective and timely advice to the Armed Forces on appropriate intelligence and security matters. The Key Targets for the Agency for the 12 months from April 1998 are:

Key Target 1:
To meet 100% of operational taskings required by the Department to the standards agreed by the Director General of Intelligence and Geographic Resources.

Key Target 2:
To establish an effective quality evaluation methodology for training by March 1999 and establish the baseline for future improvements.

Key Target 3:
To deliver the training programme endorsed by the Defence Intelligence Training Policy Group within agreed resources.

Key Target 4:
To investigate measures of efficiency within Agency training Outputs.

Key Target 5:
To achieve a 2.5 per cent. improvement in efficiency.

Atomic Weapons Establishment (Technical Papers)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of the papers produced by the Radiation Physics Division of the Atomic Weapons Establishment in its Plasma Physics Notes and Radiation Physics Department Technical Notes series of papers which are currently unclassified, indicating the title of each paper and the date on which each paper was produced. [65057]

Mr. Spellar: I have arranged for a list of unclassified papers from the relevant series to be placed in the Library of the House.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Black Shaheen

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when export licences for a stand-off weapon known as the Black Shaheen were granted. [62919]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* No licence has been issued for the export of the Black Shaheen missile or its sub assemblies, but we expect to licence the export of sub assemblies to France subject to the agreement and implementation of suitable technical safeguards.

Export Licences

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ensure that the licensed production of arms by British companies requires that *(a)* deals to license arms production overseas have to pass the same checks as direct exports, including parliamentary reporting and *(b)* exports via UK licensed products overseas must require UK export licences. [64534]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* In its recent report on Strategic Export Controls, the Trade and Industry Committee recommended that the question of controls on licensed production overseas should be addressed in the Wassenaar Arrangement. We are currently considering this and the Committee's other recommendations and will be responding to the Committee in due course.

The issue of controls on licensed production overseas has also been raised in a number of the responses to the White Paper on Strategic Export Controls and will therefore also be considered in our review of the White Paper proposals in the light of the results of the consultation.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what export licences have been applied for and granted since 1 May 1997 for military and dual use goods; and how many licences were refused. [64531]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 2 May 1997 and 27 November 1998, decisions were made on 14,423 applications made in the same period for Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) or Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) covering the export of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List; or of goods subject to export control by being listed in Schedule 2 to the Dual-Use and Related Goods (Export Control) Regulations 1996, as amended, or in Annex 1 to Council Decision No. 94/942/CFSP, as amended. Of these, 13,965 SIELs and 382 OIELs were issued, and 76 applications for SIELs were refused.

In addition, goods may have been exported under certain Open General Export Licences; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

This information should be considered in light of the answer given by my predecessor to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *256–58*.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the countries for which licences have been given for military and dual use goods since 1 May 1997, indicating the types of goods concerned. [64532]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *149*.

Patents

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to simplify the process of registration of patents in the United Kingdom. [64643]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The Government's 1998 Competitiveness White Paper recognises the fundamental importance of intellectual property rights, including patents, to an innovative economy, and the need for such rights to be accessible. The Patent Office will therefore be continuing its drive to simplify its detailed rules and procedures to make it easier for businesses, especially small and medium enterprises, to obtain patent protection. Building on steps it has already taken, for example in making patent application forms available on its web-site, the Office will be actively pursuing the possibilities for its customers to deal electronically. The Government will also be working with their European partners to simplify and harmonise the patent system in Europe, in particular in response to European Commission proposals expected following its Green Paper on the Community Patent and the Patent System in Europe.

Food Retailing

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made by the OFT in its investigation into competition in food retailing; and if he will make a statement. [65074]

Dr. Howells: I understand that the Director General of Fair Trading hopes to complete preliminary investigations into supermarket profitability within the next couple of months. It is a matter for him how and when he makes his findings public.

Export Controls

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy that arms brokering is made subject to licensed approval under the same criteria as those contained in the EU Code of Conduct. [64536]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The White Paper on Strategic Export Controls, which was published on 1 July 1998, contains proposals to extend controls on trafficking and brokering in a number of areas. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on 14 December 1998, *Official Report,* column *364*, in which she set out the Government's proposals.

A variety of views have been expressed on these proposals, with a number of respondents to the White Paper suggesting wider controls in this area than those which the Government have proposed. We are currently reviewing all the proposals contained in the White Paper in the light of the responses received.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans the Government have to legislate to implement the recommendations of the Scott report; [65001]

(2) what plans the Government have to review licensing requirements for strategic arms exports. [65002]

Mr. Wills: The White Paper on Strategic Export Controls, which was published on 1 July 1998, contained the Government's proposals in response to the recommendations on strategic export controls made by Sir Richard Scott. It also contained a number of proposals for new licensing requirements, including the extension of controls on the trafficking and brokering of goods in certain circumstances, and the introduction of controls on the transfer of technology by intangible means.

We are currently reviewing the White Paper proposals in the light of responses to it. The Government aim to introduce new primary legislation as soon as there is time in the legislative programme.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of pensioners will be dependent on means tests, once the Partnership in Pensions is fully operative. [64682]

Mr. Timms: The proposals in the Government's Green Paper "Partnership in Pensions" are designed to ensure that someone with a full working life, or years covered by credits, will receive a pension on retirement above the Minimum Income Guarantee.

The proposals in "Partnership in Pensions" will promote behavioural changes through the spread of good value funded second pensions, improved pensions education, and the greater reward in retirement from moving from benefits to work. It is not possible to forecast the impact of complex behavioural changes over 50 years.

With no allowance for behavioural change it is estimated that by 2050 the number of those receiving Minimum Income Guarantee will fall from approximately 1 in 3 pensioner households (rather than individual pensioners) to approximately 1 in 4 and fall further in later years.

As an illustration of the possible impact of behavioural effects, if all those in work saved an additional 5 per cent., the figure would fall to approximately 1 in 5 in 2050.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what take up rate for the stakeholder pension the figures of *(a)* £0.7 billion lost in lower National Insurance contributions through contracting out and *(b)* the extra state support of an initial £500 million are based. [65235]

Mr. Timms: As chapter 12 of the Green Paper on pensions "Partnership in Pensions" makes clear, the Department estimate that £0.7 billion would be lost in National Insurance revenue for every million people who contract out of the new State Second Pension scheme. This cost would be recouped in the long term because people would no longer receive the State Second Pension when they retire. The figure of £0.5 billion represents the net National Insurance revenue loss, after allowing for the return of some low earners to State Second Pension.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the number of complaints referred to the Independent Case Examiner for the Child Support Agency indicating the number of complaints

which have *(a)* been upheld and *(b)* resulted in compensation payments being made in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [65036]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Faith Boardman to Mr. Denis Murphy, dated 11 January 1999:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support Agency cases referred to the Independent Case Examiner.

The Office of the Independent Case Examiner commenced work in April 1997. When the Agency responds to a complaint the client is provided with details on the services of the Independent Case Examiner to enable them to contact her directly.

During the twelve month period to 30 November 1998, 1463 clients made applications to the Independent Case Examiner. Only about one third of applications received by the Independent Case Examiner result in a full investigation. There are a number of reasons for this; the required gateways for investigation may not be satisfied; or the case may fall outside the Independent Case Examiner's jurisdiction. Additionally an increasing number of complaints are resolved early following successful mediation, without the need for a full investigation.

In the same period, the Independent Case Examiner issued 217 final reports following her investigation (some of these reports will relate to applications received prior to 1 December 1997 as the target for completion of a full investigation is 19 weeks). In 73 of these reports the complaint was fully upheld and in 132 the complaint was partially upheld. Of these 217 cases, 172 resulted in compensation being paid.

Compensation payments are considered where a clear and unambiguous error by the Agency has resulted in distress or in actual financial loss to the client which is not recoverable through other means.

We are committed to providing good quality customer service and are continuing to develop a close working relationship with the Independent Case Examiner and her staff, meeting regularly to identify ways in which our service to clients can be improved.

This has led to the Agency's Business Units adopting a case study approach to cases handled by the Independent Case Examiner. This involves the Business Unit Manager and staff involved with the case identifying lessons learned, introducing improvements and good working practices and liaising with the office of the Independent Case Examiner.

We have reviewed the way that we handle complaints and we have increased resources for our Client Helplines and the National Enquiry Line, extended our hours of opening to cover 8.00 am to 8.00 pm Monday to Friday and 9.00 am to 5.00 pm on Saturdays and completed trials to greatly improve and increase clients' opportunities to secure a face to face service. Through these measures our aim is to deal with clients' problems at an early stage and prevent problems escalating.

I am confident that through closer liaison with the Independent Case Examiner and the action we have already taken we have started to address the problems we have in the way we deal with clients' complaints. Where we discover we have made mistakes or caused delay we will do everything in our power to put things right as quickly as possible and apologise to the clients concerned. I recognise that we have a long way to go to remedy our problems fully, but we expect clients to see continuous ongoing improvements by the end of 1998–99 and beyond.

I hope this is helpful.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many review claims have been *(a)* dealt with by the Disability Unit, *(b)* disallowed and *(c)* overturned on appeal, (i) since 1 January 1997 and (ii) since the current review has been in operation. [64757]

Mr. Timms: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Ronnie Fearn, dated 11 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many review claims have been (a) dealt with by the Disability Unit, (b) disallowed and (c) overturned on appeal, (i) since 1st January 1997 and (ii) since the current review has been in operation.

I have assumed your reference to the "current review" is a reference to the Benefit Integrity Project (BIP) which has been reviewing the entitlement of people receiving the higher rate mobility component with the higher or middle rate care component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

It may be helpful if I explain that more detailed statistical information is held about individual cases under the BIP than about general DLA cases, which are not individually tracked.

Table A at Annex 1 contains information about DLA reviews and appeals dealt with outside the BIP. *Table B*, also at Annex 1, has information about BIP reviews and appeals. For the reasons stated in the previous paragraph, it is not possible to make a direct comparison between the two tables.

You will also wish to know that *any* review may result in any one of the following outcomes:

Disallowed—all benefit has been disallowed

Reduced—level of award reduced

Maintained—this upholds the previous decision given

Award varied—benefit payable remains the same, but there has been a change to the components or length of award has changed

Withdrawn—the review request has been withdrawn by the customer

Defective—the review request was not signed and after returning it to the customer has not been received back at the Disability Benefits Directorate

No grounds—no legal basis on which to look at the case again

Allowed—the review has resulted in benefit award

Increased—a component not previously awarded has been allowed

Turning now to appeals, I must explain that, while the appeals figures quoted all relate to appeals following previous reviews, they do not necessarily relate to appeals against review decisions given during the same period. This is because of the time lag between a review decision being given, an appeal being made and submitted to Independent Tribunal Service and the appeal Hearing taking place. In other words, it is not possible to state exactly the number of successful appeals resulting from appeals against review decisions for the periods requested in your Question.

You may find it helpful to know that statistical information about BIP, including details of reviews and appeals is, published on a monthly basis and is placed in the House of Commons Library.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Table A—Non BIP reviews and appeals

Non BIP cases from 1 January 1997 to 31 October 1998	
Number of reviews decisions made	646,249
Number of reviews disallowed	10,607
Number of appeal decisions made	77,474
Number of appeal decisions overturned in the customer's favour	24,883

Source:
DBD Resource and Assurance Group

Table B—BIP reviews and appeals

Total BIP cases to 31 October 1998	
Number of review decisions made	17,913
Number of reviews totally disallowing benefit	5,347
Number of reviews resulting in the mobility component only being disallowed	880
Number of reviews resulting in the care component only being disallowed	2,108
Number of Appeals decisions made	1,116
Number of cases overturned resulting in the case being restored to the original award or to a higher rate	305

Note:

Figures are provisional and subject to change

Source:

Statistical databases from BIP database

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the Disability Unit's *(a)* published targets and *(b)* current target attainment levels for processing review claims for the disability living allowance. [64759]

Mr. Timms: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Ronnie Fearn, dated 11 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what the Disability Unit's (a) published targets and (b) current target attainment levels are for processing review claims for the Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

The Disability Benefits Directorate's published targets for 1998–1999 for clearance of DLA Reviews is 60 per cent. in 55 working days and 80 per cent. in 75 working days.

The actual year to date achievement of DLA reviews clearances, as at November 1998, is 70 per cent. in 55 days and 86 per cent. in 75 days.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for disability living allowance were received by the Disability Benefits Unit in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998; and what was the average length of time taken from the Unit receiving the application to the applicant being notified of the decision in each of the three years concerned. [65039]

Mr. Timms: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Denis Murphy, dated 11 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many applications for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) were received by the Disability Benefits Unit in (a) 1996, (b) 1997 and (c) 1998: and what was the average length of time taken from the Unit receiving the application until the applicant being notified of the decision in each of the three years concerned.

The total number of DLA new claim applications and Special Rules new claim applications received by the Disability Benefits Directorate are shown at Annex A.

The average length of time taken from receipt of the application until the applicant being notified of the decision for 1997 and 1998 is also shown at Annex A. I am unable to provide information for 1996 as system reports that provide the actual average clearance times were not in existence until the following year.

The increase in time taken to clear new claims is the result of revised guidance given to Adjudication Officers on 9 February 1998 which has led them to seek supporting evidence in a higher number of cases. Time taken for evidence to arrive is included in the clearance time figures.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Number of DLA claims received and average clearance times

DLA claims received	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Normal Rules (NR)	482,521	491,167	437,531
Special Rules (SR)	28,190	26,421	23,828

DLA claims average clearance			
Normal rules (NR)	N/A	32 days	37 days
Special rules (SR)	N/A	7 days	8 days

Source:

DBD Resource and Assurance Group.

Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Welfare Benefit Advice

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the total amount spent on welfare benefit advice in Wales in each of the past 10 years; and if he will estimate the amount of additional benefit claimed as a result of this expenditure in each of the past 10 years. [64658]

Angela Eagle: This is an operational matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Chris Ruane, dated 11 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will estimate the total amount spent on welfare benefit advice in Wales in each of the past 10 years; and if he will estimate the amount of additional benefit claimed as a result of this expenditure in each of the past 10 years.

One of the most important role of Benefits Agency (BA) staff is to provide advice and information on benefit matters to our customers. This is part of the normal every day service delivery process. Advice and information is provided on a daily basis by any member of staff who works in the benefit related field of operations. We do not, therefore, separate out the cost of providing this service, regarding it as an integral part of the overall approach we take to customer service.

As the BA does not maintain discrete information on the provision of benefit advice and information, it is not possible to estimate an amount of additional benefit claimed as a result of this service.

I am sorry that I cannot be more helpful in this instance.

Pensions on Divorce

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will respond to the Social Security Committee's Fifth report of 1997–98, Pensions on Divorce HC869. [65652]

Mr. Timms: I have written today to the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) in response to the Social Security Select Committee Report. A copy of the letter has been placed in the Library.

SCOTLAND

Repeat Offenders

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, what considerations he has given to the methods available for dealing with serious repeat offenders; and if he will make a statement. [65639]

Mr. McLeish: We are committed to taking all reasonable steps to protect the public from serious repeat offenders, many of whom may suffer from personality disorders. We have therefore decided to establish a committee to review the sentencing and treatment of serious violent and sexual offenders, including those with personality disorders, in Scotland. I am delighted that the hon. Lord MacLean, who is a Senator of the College of Justice, has accepted the Secretary of State's invitation to act as chairman of the committee. It will have the following terms of reference:

To consider experience in Scotland and elsewhere and to make proposals for the sentencing disposals for, and the future management and treatment of, serious sexual and violent offenders who may present a continuing danger to the public. In particular:

to consider whether the current legislative framework matches the present level of knowledge of the subject, provides the courts with an appropriate range of options and affords the general public adequate protection from those offenders;

to compare practice, diagnosis and treatment with that elsewhere, to build on current expertise and research to inform the development of a medical protocol to respond to the needs of personality disordered offenders;

to specify the services required by this group of offenders and the means of delivery;

to consider the question of release/discharge into the community and service needs in the community for supervising those offenders.

The membership of the Committee and its arrangements for taking evidence will be announced later.

HEALTH

Social Services Authorities

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list all the local authority social services authorities specifying in respect of each whether the chair is a man or a woman. [65317]

Mr. Hutton: Local authorities are not required to inform the Department on the details of the chair, therefore the information requested is not available centrally.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Liquor Licensing

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Government expect to announce proposals to reform liquor licensing in England and Wales. [65090]

Mr. George Howarth: Our review of liquor licensing will produce proposals for change as soon as possible, consistent with the thoroughgoing nature of the exercise.

Female Offenders

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the compliance of the practice of placing women under the age of 18 years in adult jails with the UK's responsibilities under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [65009]

Mr. George Howarth: The United Kingdom has entered a reservation which allows the right not to apply Article 37 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child where mixing of children and adults in prison is deemed to be mutually beneficial, to allow for closeness to home or regime provision.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women aged 15, 16 and 17 years are currently imprisoned in adult women's prisons. [65006]

Mr. George Howarth: The currently available information relates to the population on the last day of November 1998 and is given in the table. Unsentenced 17-year-olds are held in prison accommodation. Those sentenced to detention in a Young Offender Institution are held in designated young offender accommodation within adult prisons.

Population of 15, 16 and 17-year-old females in adult prisons on 30 November 1998 [1]

Age	*Number*
15	6
16	24
17	64

[1] Provisional figures

Crime Reduction Programme

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for tackling crime. [65563]

Mr. Straw: The Government are committed to reducing crime, tackling its causes and ensuring proper punishment of those who break the law.

We have already demonstrated our commitment by introducing tough new measures in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to deal with young offenders; drug misusers; sexual, violent and racist offenders; and those whose anti-social behaviour blights the lives of so many of our citizens. As part of our overall strategy, I also announced on 21 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *913–16*, that the Government were making available through the Comprehensive Spending Review £250m over the next three years for a new crime reduction

programme. In addition, extra resources were made available to the police, the Prison Service and probation services. The programme is based on concrete evidence of what is effective in reducing crime and tackling its causes.

I have published today a briefing paper entitled "Reducing Crime and Tackling Its Causes" which sets out further details on the crime reduction programme and the range of initiatives which has been developed so far, including important projects on domestic burglary and targeted policing. I have placed copies of the paper in the Library.

Domestic burglary is one of the most common crimes and causes enormous distress to victims. In addition to the measures in the crime reduction programme, therefore, I have decided to bring into force in December the provisions of section 4 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997. This provides for minimum sentences of three years for those convicted for a third time of this offence and will ensure that those who commit this crime repeatedly are severely punished.

Special Constables

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on the *(a)* current and *(b)* future use of special constables by the police force; [64963]

(2) if he will estimate how many hours special constables, on average, work each week in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Norfolk; what estimate he has made of future work loads; and if he will make a statement; [64960]

(3) how many special constables are currently employed in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Norfolk; what estimate he has made of the future employment levels; and if he will make a statement; [64961]

(4) what estimate his Department has made of expenditure on special constables *(a)* in 1998–99 and *(b)* in each year of the planning period in (i) England and Wales and (ii) Norfolk; and if he will make a statement. [64964]

Mr. Boateng: The information required in respect of Norfolk Special Constabulary is as follows:

(a) The average number of hours duty performed per special constable per week is 3.2 excluding time spent training.

(b) Norfolk Constabulary currently has a strength of 342 special constables and the force seeks to sustain this level at least for 1999–2000.

(c) The force estimates its expenditure on special constables in 1998–99 will be £80,200.

Until recently, the number of hours duty performed by special constables and the cost of the special constabularies have not been recorded by the police forces of England and Wales. However, the Special Constabulary Working Group 1995–96 recommended that this information should be identified and all forces should have in place systems to collect this data. Forces will be asked to provide the total number of hours duty performed by their special constables from 1998–99. Most forces expect special constables to perform an average of at least four hours per week. Many special constables do more.

The costs of special constables vary considerably from force to force and it is not possible to estimate the overall expenditure. Special constables are funded from the Police Grant and it is a matter for chief officers how they distribute funding to their special constabularies. In the light of the Working Group's recommendation and improved administration of their special constabularies, forces should be developing systems to identify the costs in future.

As at 30 September 1998, there were 17,304 (provisional figure) special constables in England and Wales. The figure has dropped from 19,734 during the previous 18 months. The principle reason for the decline in numbers has been higher recruiting standards to reflect that special constables are being trained and deployed on a wider variety of duties than before including more "front line" duties. As a result, the recruiting criteria is now very similar to that for regular officers and consequently a large number of applicants who would previously have been accepted into the Special Constabulary are being rejected. In addition, forces have weeded out the special constables who wanted only to perform "soft" duties, e.g. fetes, carnivals, etc., and 13 per cent. of special constables who resign to join the regular service.

We estimate that the decrease in numbers will soon level out and that numbers will slowly increase in the next few years. We do not believe in putting a national target on the number of special constables. It is for the chief officer of each force to decide whether a target figure is appropriate and what that figure should be.

Today's special is a police officer trained to professional standards commanding full confidence of regular colleagues and the public. He or she is able to perform many of the duties of the regular officer and many specials are trained and deployed on specialist duties. We believe this is an excellent use of a valuable resource available to chief officers and support this continued development of the Special Constabulary for the foreseeable future.

Road Traffic Offences

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the penalties in respect of a conviction of a vehicle's registered keeper for failure to name the known driver of the vehicle following a road traffic offence. [64962]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have no plans to increase the maximum penalty available for this offence, which is currently a fine of £1,000, discretionary disqualification from driving and three penalty points on the licence. I wrote to the hon. Member on 17 December 1998 with further details.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63926]

Mr. Morley: Expenditure by MAFF, since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail has been as follows:

(a) £405,000

(b) £1,071,000

(c) £1,100,000.

Badgers

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he made of the research carried out by his Department's laboratories into the effect of trace element deficiencies in cattle resistant to TB, in reaching his decision to proceed with the cull of the badger population. [64981]

Mr. Rooker: I have no wish to kill badgers and considered all alternative approaches before concluding that the culling trial must be an integral part of our wide ranging programme to develop a sustainable science based policy to control TB in cattle.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what assessment he has made of the compliance of the proposed randomised badger culling trial with the United Kingdom's obligations under the Berne Convention; [64802]

(2) if he will make a statement on the Government's response to the recent decision of the Standing Committee of the Berne Convention on the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitats to request the United Kingdom Government to postpone the randomised badger culling trial for one year. [64801]

Mr. Rooker: The Government are considering the recommendation of the Standing Committee.

Cattle (Food Chain)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if all cattle born after 1 August 1996 will be eligible to enter the food chain. [64698]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* Subject to meeting health and hygiene requirements, beef from all cattle which meet the requirements of the Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (No 2) Regulations 1996 is eligible to enter the food chain. These Regulations are intended to prevent beef from cattle aged more than 30 months at the time of slaughter from being sold for human consumption unless the animal was certificated under the Beef Assurance Scheme, for which the age limit is 42 months, or the beef came from an animal born, reared and slaughtered in one of 14 countries which are exempt from the controls.

The "over 30 month rule" was implemented following receipt of advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC). The Committee identified, at its meeting on 9 November 1998, criteria whereby the controls on beef over thirty months of age could be reviewed in the future. It hopes to begin to address this at its meeting planned for March 1999. The Committee recognised that this would require careful study and would almost certainly need to be considered over several meetings.

Animal Health

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of his discussions with the Home Office about possible criteria for further controls enabling his Department to take into account the treatment of animals in the country of destination before he issues official non-statutory health certification. [64986]

Mr. Rooker: BSE priorities have intervened and resources have not been available to progress this work but I hope that discussions with the Home Office will be resumed shortly.

CABINET OFFICE

Women's National Commission

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the administrative arrangements within his Department relating to *(a)* the Women's National Commission and *(b)* the Women's Unit. [64091]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Women's Unit (WU) supports the Ministers for Women in ensuring that the interests of women are taken into account throughout Government. The Women's National Commission (WNC) is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) which carries out an agreed annual work programme to help provide Government with the informed opinion of women through its member organisations which together represent more than 8 million women.

The WU and WNC moved to the Cabinet Office following the Cabinet reshuffle last July.

The Minister for Women, the right hon. Baroness Jay, carries Ministerial responsibility for the work of the Women's Unit and the Women's National Commission. The spokesperson in the House on women's issues is my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health.

However, the Cabinet Office provides office accommodation and services for WU and WNC staff, the majority of whom are on loan to the Cabinet Office from a number of Whitehall departments. For line management purposes they report to Cabinet Office senior management.

The Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office is the accounting officer responsible for WU and WNC expenditure. The Director of the Women's Unit holds delegated responsibility for the budget.

The WNC has recently been subject to a quinquennial review and a report of the review's findings will be placed in the Library of the House shortly.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Local Transport Plans

13. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what way he is encouraging local authorities to improve local transport plans. [63578]

Dr. Reid: Local transport plans are the essential building blocks of the New Deal for Transport. The Government are providing an additional £700 million over the next three years to help ensure their effective implementation. We have also issued guidance to local authorities on how to prepare their plans.

Provisional plans are due for submission this July, so this year will see us begin to deliver on the benefits of integrated transport at a local level.

Public Transport (Barnet and Enfield)

14. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement concerning public transport links between the major health service sites in Barnet and Enfield. [63579]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have had no previous representations on this matter. The provisions of suitable public transport access to health service sites should be given careful consideration by all health authorities and trusts, working in partnership with local councils and transport operators.

Aircraft Noise

15. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the impact on health of noise from aircraft, with particular reference to night-time noise; and what plans he has to reduce permitted noise levels. [63580]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have commissioned a research trial on the effect of aircraft noise on sleep disturbance, and research commissioned jointly with the Department of Health will include some study of the non-auditory health effects of aircraft noise. No research results are available for evaluation yet. We expect to publish a supplementary consultation paper on aircraft noise limits early in the new year.

Air Quality

17. **Mrs. Anne Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve air quality. [63582]

Mr. Meacher: The Deputy Prime Minister and I hope to make an announcement tomorrow about the outcome of our review of the National Air Quality Strategy, and will set out our plans for improving air quality then.

Non-unitary Authorities

18. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of the population of England now resides in non-unitary authority areas. [63583]

Mr. Raynsford: The provision of such statistics is the responsibility of the Office for National Statistics under my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, they advise that 46.2 per cent. of the population of England now reside in non-unitary authorities.

Rural Bus Services

20. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what actions he has taken to encourage enhanced levels of bus services in rural areas. [63585]

Dr. Reid: We have made an additional £32.5 million a year available to English local authorities for new rural bus services. We have also announced support totalling £11.4 million for 46 projects in this year's rural bus challenge competition; there will be similar challenges in future years.

Council Taxes (Shire Areas)

21. **Mr. Sayeed:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by how much he estimates council taxes in shire areas will increase over the next three years. [63586]

Ms Armstrong: Decisions on the level of council tax are a matter for each authority.

M1

23. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of traffic congestion on the London to Northampton section of the M1. [63588]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Traffic flows on the M1 are continually monitored. Published stress levels show that north of Luton (Junction 10), the M1 generally operates satisfactorily. To the south of Luton the road experiences peak period congestion for at least half the days of the year.

Brown-field Sites

24. **Mrs. Spelman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure his targets for brown-field sites will be met. [63589]

Mr. Raynsford: Our policy document, "Planning for the Communities of the Future", initiated a wide-ranging programme to help local planning authorities and developers bring forward more previously-developed sites for housing. This programme includes a full revision of the current national Planning Policy Guidance Note on housing (PPG3) to put far more emphasis on the use recycled land. A consultation draft of PPG3 will be issued shortly.

35. **Mr. Etherington:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage the building of homes on recycled urban land. [63600]

Mr. Raynsford: Our policy document, "Planning for the Communities of the Future", initiated a wide-ranging programme to help local planning authorities and developers bring forward more previously-developed sites for housing. This programme includes a full revision of the current national Planning Policy Guidance Note on housing (PPG3) to put far more emphasis on the recycling of land. A consultation draft of PPG3 will be issued in the New Year.

Road User Charging

25. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the benefits of introducing road user charging. [63590]

Dr. Reid: Reducing congestion through road charging should improve travel times and reliability, reducing business costs and driver frustration; and reduce pollution, noise and nuisance.

Local authorities will spend the revenues on improving local transport. Authorities will have to provide a detailed assessment of costs and benefits when submitting a charging scheme for approval.

Train Services

26. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to improve the reliability and quality of rail passenger services. [63591]

Dr. Reid: On 26 November we agreed an action plan with all franchisees and Railtrack to improve performance. Measures include 800 new train drivers, 500 new vehicles, and a new national passenger survey. There will be a wider-ranging National Railway Summit next February to look at longer term improvements.

29. **Mr. Dennis Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking which will enhance the reliability and quality of passenger rail services. [63594]

Dr. Reid: The Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Transport in London and I met representatives of all franchisees and Railtrack on 26 November and agreed an action plan to tackle performance problems. Measures include 800 new train drivers, 500 new vehicles, a joint "hit squad" to identify and tackle the worst 50 blackspots, a national "trouble shooter" team to tackle punctuality problems, and a new national passenger survey to find out what passengers think about their rail services. A wider-ranging National Railway Summit will be held next February to build on the measures and action identified.

30. **Jacqui Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made in improving passenger rail services. [63599]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Although a number of train operators have taken steps to improve performance levels, overall performance has continued to fall. When the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Transport and I met with passenger rail franchisees and Railtrack on 26 November we made it clear that current performance levels are unacceptable and that we expect to see progressive year on year improvements from the rail industry. An action plan to tackle short term performance problems was agreed at the meeting. There will also be a wide-ranging National Railway Summit next February to look at medium to longer term improvements.

Integrated Transport Policy

27. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by what criteria he intends to measure the performance of his integrated transport strategy; and if he will make a statement. [63592]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Our New Deal for Transport will have succeeded when we have a modern, integrated transport system that offers everyone more choice and a better quality of life. A range of indicators at national, regional and local level will be used to measure performance, as set out in the White Paper. In addition, we are setting up the Commission for Integrated Transport to monitor progress and advise on the development of new targets.

Rate Support Grant Settlement

28. **Sir David Madel:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to visit County Hall, Bedford, to discuss the 1999–2000 rate support grant settlement; and if he will make a statement. [63593]

Ms Armstrong: I currently have no plans to visit County Hall to discuss the provisional local government finance settlement 1999–2000. However, we have been consulting local authorities on our proposals and councils were able to request a meeting as part of that process. DETR Ministers will have met 72 authorities during the consultation period which ends today. Bedfordshire County Council did not request a meeting to discuss their representation.

Council Tenants

30. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made in increasing the powers of council tenants to manage their own neighbourhoods. [63595]

Ms Armstrong: I intend shortly to consult on my proposals for a system of Tenant Compacts for all council tenants. The introduction of the Compacts is intended to provide increased scope for tenants to become involved, to the extent that they wish, in the management of their homes. They will be an important complement to the existing powers under the statutory Right to Manage. The role of tenants in housing and neighbourhood management is also being looked at through the work of the Government's Social Exclusion Unit.

Neighbourhood Housing Allocation

31. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policy in respect of neighbourhood housing allocation. [63596]

Mr. Raynsford: The Housing Act 1996 requires local housing authorities to allocate housing on the basis of housing need. Specifically, households falling within certain prescribed priority categories must be given 'reasonable preference' in an authority's allocation scheme. These categories include families with dependent children, households with medical or welfare needs for settled housing and certain homeless people. Our policy is to encourage local authorities to have allocation policies which meet housing need in their areas, create sustainable communities and ensure efficient use of stock.

BEST Bus Pensioners

32. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the delay in paying compensation to the BEST bus pensioners. [63597]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Discussions continue with the NBC pension trustees on achieving an out-of-court settlement of their claim for return of the BEST pensions surplus. We are giving high priority to achieving a just settlement without any unnecessary delay.

A130

33. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to reach a decision on the PFI bid for the A130 improvement scheme. [63598]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are continuing to consider the Essex County Council proposals for the A130. We will announce our decision on the project as soon as possible.

Beacon Status

36. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made on selecting councils for beacon status. [63601]

Ms Armstrong: We are working closely with the Local Government Association in developing the scheme for beacon councils, and will be consulting on our proposals shortly. We aim to invite applications for beacon status in the Spring.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

37. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to reform the law relating to people living in houses in multiple occupation. [63602]

Mr. Raynsford: We will fulfil our commitment to introduce a national licensing system for houses in multiple occupation. We plan to consult on proposals for such a system early next year. We will also seek views on changes to the existing law.

Road Networks

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the condition of road networks; and if he will make a statement. [63581]

Dr. Reid: The Government have accepted a target to end the decline in condition of the motorways and trunk roads in England by 31 March 2002. We are also committed to restore the cuts in maintenance of English local authority principal roads.

Our commitment is clear in decisions:

- to give first priority to maintenance in the Highways Agency's future investment plans; and
- to increase the principal road maintenance element of the local transport capital settlement from £80 million to £113 million (or by over 40 per cent.).

City Challenge

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out his proposals for a successor to city challenge. [63584]

Mr. Meale: The successor to City Challenge is the Single Regeneration Budget which began in 1994. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister set out details of a refocused SRB in his Housing and Regeneration Policy statement on 22 July 1998.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the Government have to agree criteria with the European Union for Objective 4 status relating to industries and areas adapting to industrial change. [64510]

Mr. Wills: I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment reached agreement with the European Commission on a programme to implement Objective 4 of the European Social Fund in all parts of Great Britain on 13 March 1998.

Driving Licences

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of 18-year-olds hold *(a)* a provisional and *(b)* a full driving licence. [64507]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The proportion of 18-year-olds holding licences is 40.5 per cent. for provisional licences and 34.9 per cent. for full licences.

Rural Action Scheme

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his rural action scheme will continue beyond 31 March 1999; and if he will make a statement. [64671]

Mr. Meale: Rural Action for the Environment was established with funding from the Rural Development Commission, the Countryside Commission and English Nature to cover the scheme's initial three-year development phase until 31 March 1995. Following the successful completion of this phase, the three agencies extended their funding until 31 March 1999. By that point it was expected that Rural Action would no longer need to rely on Government funding.

Two of the funding agencies—the Rural Development Commission and the Countryside Commission—are due to merge on 1 April to form the Countryside Agency. Both they and, provisionally, English Nature have agreed to commit sufficient funds in 1999–2000 to support the monitoring and advisory costs of the Rural Action county networks which help administer the scheme. This will help to safeguard Rural Action by putting it in the best possible position to bid for project funding, while allowing the new Countryside Agency, together with English Nature, time to consider the scheme and make a decision on its longer term future.

I welcome this approach.

Domiciliary Care

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the calculation of the sparsity factor in the social services elderly domiciliary care standard spending assessment is made on an enumeration district basis. [64575]

Ms Armstrong: The measurement of sparsity for small areas minimises the extent to which sparsity is obscured through the grouping together of sparsely populated areas with more densely populated areas. Enumeration districts are the smallest areas for which the data enables population sparsity to be calculated consistently for all local authorities.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the City of Westminster is to be allocated money for sparsity within the social services elderly domiciliary care standard spending assessment sub-block. [64576]

Ms Armstrong: Standard spending assessments (SSAs) are calculated in a consistent way by applying the same formula to all relevant local authorities. Four of the City of Westminster's 631 enumeration districts are sparsely populated. It therefore receives a very small amount by reference to the sparsity indicator in the formula. The amount within the social services domiciliary care Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs) is some £1,500, which represents 0.0006 per cent. of the total SSA for Westminster City Council.

Elderly Residential Care

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which local authorities he consulted prior to the provisional standard spending assessment settlement concerning the decision not to include those in residential care, nursing homes and long stay hospitals when counting the number of people aged 65 years or over for the purposes of calculating the social services elderly residential care standard spending assessment; and what their responses were. [64578]

Ms Armstrong: The Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) Sub-group is the forum for discussions between local government and Government Departments about possible changes to SSA formulae.

Details of options for changes to the personal social services formula are set out in the Report of the SSA Sub-group for 1999/2000. Records of discussions with local government representatives on the appropriate client base for the elderly residential social services formula can also be found in the Sub-group reports for 1997–98 and 1998–99. Copies of these reports of the Sub-group are in the Library and are also available to local authorities on the internet.

Emissions

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates he has made of the emissions of *(a)* CO_2, *(b)* SO_2, *(c)* NO_x, *(d)* fine particulates, *(e)* black smoke and *(f)* radiation created by the use of coal as a fuel for electricity generation; and what reductions in these emissions would be achieved by the use of gas as an alternative to coal. [65332]

Mr. Meale: The following table provides estimates of the emissions created by the use of both types of fuel in 1996:

	Coal	*Natural Gas*
Emissions in tonnes per GWh if electricity generated (1996)		
CO_2	224	116
SO_2	8.22	0.003
NO_x	2.64	0.33
Fine particulates (PM10)	0.20	—
Black smoke	13.2558	—
Radiation	[1]5 to 25	[1]5 to 25

[1] Radiation measured in MBq per GWh

The extent to which gas can realistically be regarded as an alternative to coal-fired generation depends on a range of factors which are discussed in the Government's Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation. There, the Government set out proposals for achieving diverse, secure and sustainable supplies of energy at competitive prices. The Government also proposed that further abatement equipment be installed to reduce certain emissions from coal-fired stations.

Freight Train Derailment (Barry)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the Health and Safety Executive to publish the report of its investigation into the freight train derailment at Barry on 27 December 1997. [65265]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) intend to publish the results of its investigation into this incident before the end of January.

Equal Opportunities Guidance

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will place DETR Centre's Guidance on Equal Opportunities in the Library; [64927]

(2) if he will place a copy of his Department's Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment in the Library. [6486

Mr. Meale: I have placed a copy of this in the Library.

Performance-related Pay

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his Department's objectives are in providing performance-related pay. [64922]

Mr. Meale: The Department's objective in providing performance-related pay is to reward staff in a way which takes account of their performance.

Departmental Staff

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies of appraisal systems have been carried out in his Department and the former Departments of Transport and Environment in the past five years. [64921]

Mr. Meale: The following studies have been carried out in the past five years:

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—an Investigation of the 1997/98 Appraisal System, Pearn Kandola, December 1998.

Evaluation of the New Staff Appraisal Systems in the former Departments of Environment and Transport, Institute of Employment Studies, October 1997.

Staff Appraisal: Report of the Working Group—part of the internal review of the Department of the Environment, 1995.

Evaluation of Staff Reporting Bias in the Department of Transport, Civil Service College, October 1995.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the basis for the 4/5ths equality rule used by personnel management in his Department. [64923]

Mr. Meale: The 4/5ths rule is used as a preliminary "rule of thumb" indicator to check for statistically significant variations between groups.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what internal specialist advice was used to help *(a)* draw up the specification and *(b)* evaluate the tenders for the study into the differential performance markings in DETR (C). [64916]

Mr. Meale: The specification was cleared with the Department's procurement policy advisers. A copy of the draft specification was also sent to the Trade Union Side prior to issue for comment. Tenders were evaluated by Personnel Management against the criteria set out in the specification.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if DETR (C) operates, formally or informally, a system of quotas for staff performance markings. [64918]

Mr. Meale: No. As part of the standard setting procedure to promote consistent standards of marking across DETR(C), we published an indicative set of marks based on the previous year's results as a guideline for standard setting officers in the 1998 appraisal round. These indicative marks are intended as a guide rather than a "quota" to be achieved and contribute to a process of "norming" designed to ensure that the system is fair. The final decision on individual performance marks rests with reporting officers applying the criteria in the appraisal guidance.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many DETR (C) staff are in post in each DETR (C) building, excluding the Government Offices, broken down by *(a)* grade, *(b)* gender, *(c)* ethnicity, *(d)* part/full time working and *(e)* disability. [64805]

Mr. Meale: DETR(C) staff are based in approximately 50 buildings. Detailed breakdowns for each building cannot be provided without incurring disproportionate costs.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many standard-setting meetings took place as part of the 1998 appraisal round in DETR (C); what records are kept of the outcomes of such meetings; and if individual civil servants' performance markings are discussed in such meetings. [64917]

Mr. Meale: About 160 Standard Setting Meetings took place at the end of the reporting year. Records of the outcomes were kept to make comparisons between the performance marks agreed at the meeting and those eventually recorded. The purpose of the standard setting process it to promote fair and consistent standards across DETR(C) and a fundamental part of meeting this purpose requires the discussion of individual performance.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what were the appraisal performance markings awarded to civil servants in 1998 in *(a)* each agency associated with his Department and *(b)* each traffic area office broken down by (i) grade, (ii) gender, (iii) ethnicity, (iv) part/full time working and (v) disability; [64803]

(2) if the Cabinet Office's 4/5s rule used to check for potential adverse impact has been applied to civil servants' performance markings in the 1998 report round in each of his Department's agencies *(a)* MCA, *(b)* DVLA, *(c)* VI, *(d)* QEII, *(e)* PINS, *(f)* DSA, *(g)* VCA and *(h)* HA. [64825]

Mr. Meale: Staff in Traffic Area Offices are part of DETR(C) and are therefore included in the DETR(C) data already provided. With regard to executive agencies, I have asked Agency Chief Executives to reply separately for their respective agencies.

Letter from Avil Beynon to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

1. DVLA's Chief Executive has asked me to respond to your request for a breakdown of 1998 staff appraisal marks in the Agency. I attach tables listing the following information:

Gender/Working Pattern/Disability: Table A

Gender/Working Pattern/Ethnicity: Table B

Gender/Grade/Working Pattern: Table C

2. In accordance with Cabinet Office guidance, where the numbers in any category falls below 5, the data has not been disclosed to protect the privacy of individual members of staff. Table A and Table B do not therefore provide a breakdown of performance by grade for disabled and ethnic staff. To do so would reveal individual performance marks. In Table C, where the spread of representation is below 5, the data is referred to as X.

3. 1998 Annual Staff Reports (ASRs) have yet to be completed for Administrative Officers, Administrative Assistants and equivalent grades and so the figures supplied are for 1997 ASR markings for these grades. Excluded from the figures is a large number of permanent, fixed term and casual staff recruited in the period December 1997 to December 1998 who have yet received a formal appraisal report.

4. Although the four-fifths rule has not been used as a guideline to check for any potential adverse impact, the Agency is in the process of harmonising the annual performance reporting systems. In future, this will help produce better analyses of the system and identify any potential Equality Proofing difficulties associated with performance appraisal.

ASR analysis—disabled staff—DVLA 1997/98 Table A

Male box markings

	Full time							Part time						
All grades	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5
Totals	—	7	—	32	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

ASR analysis—disabled staff—DVLA 1997/98 Table A

Female box markings

	Full time							Part time						
All grades	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5
Totals	—	19	—	34	—	—	2	—	6	—	7	—	—	—

ASR analysis—Ethnic origin—DVLA 1997/98 Table B

Male

	Full time							Part time						
All grades	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5
Totals	—	6	1	23	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—

ASR analysis—Ethnic origin—DVLA 1997/98 Table B

Female

	Full time							Part time						
All grades	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5	1	2	3+	3	3–	4	5
Totals	—	12	—	30	—	—	—	—	3	—	10	—	—	—

ASR analysis—by staff numbers—DVLA 1997/98 Table C

Male box markings

	Full time							Part time						
Grade	*1*	*2*	*3+*	*3*	*3–*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3+*	*3*	*3–*	*4*	*5*
AA	2	90	—	169	—	1	1	—	2	—	33	—	—	—
SGB2	—	6	—	45	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
TYP	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
AO	4	141	—	267	—	1	—	X	X	—	X	—	X	X
PERSEC	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SGB1	—	8	—	6	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SM3	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SOGD	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
EO	—	60	—	67	—	—	—	X	X	—	X	—	—	—
SPS	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
ALIB	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SM2	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
CO4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SOGC	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
PTO	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
HEO	—	48	—	40	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SOGB	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SEO	1	17	9	6	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SPTO	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
GRD7	—	8	4	4	—	—	—	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
GRD6	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
MED	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Totals	9	396	15	606	0	4	1	0	3	1	36	0	1	0

ASR analysis—by staff numbers—DVLA 1997/98 Table C

Female box markings

	Full time							Part time						
Grade	*1*	*2*	*3+*	*3*	*3–*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3+*	*3*	*3–*	*4*	*5*
AA	2	276	—	361	—	2	3	—	90	—	223	—	2	—
SGB2	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
TYP	—	15	—	6	—	—	—	—	6	—	10	—	—	—
AO	17	408	—	462	—	1	—	1	65	—	190	—	1	—

ASR analysis—by staff numbers—DVLA 1997/98 Table C

	Female box markings													
	Full time							Part time						
Grade	*1*	*2*	*3+*	*3*	*3–*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3+*	*3*	*3–*	*4*	*5*
PERSEC	—	12	—	1	—	—	—	X	X	—	X	—	X	X
SGB1	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SM3	—	6	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SOGD	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
EO	2	122	—	91	—	—	—	—	17	—	18	—	1	—
SPS	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
ALIB	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SM2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
CO4	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SOGC	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
PTO	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
HEO	1	43	—	32	—	—	—	X	X	—	X	—	X	X
SOGB	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SEO	—	6	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SPTO	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
GRD7	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
GRD6	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
MED	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Totals	22	896	4	957	0	3	3	1	181	0	442	0	4	0

Letter from Maurice Storey to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

I have been asked by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to reply to your questions about staff report marks in the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA).

The enclosed schedule provides annual staff report mark details broken down by grade and gender for the report round ending 30 June 1998. Grade breakdowns by ethnicity, part/full time working and disability have not been provided where individuals might be identified as this would be contrary to Cabinet Office guidance on the confidentiality of staff records.

An analysis of the Agency's performance markings did not reveal any material adverse impact on MCA staff and it was not necessary therefore to apply the Cabinet Office's 4/5ths rule.

Performance marking standards continue to be monitored by the Agency's personnel branch to detect any potential adverse impact on staff.

MCA summary of all grades

	Box 1		*Box 2*		*Box 3*		*Box 4*	
Pay band/grade	*male*	*female*	*male*	*female*	*male*	*female*	*male*	*female*
Pay Band A								
AA/CWA/TYP/SGB2	0	0	16	41	79	95	1	0
Pay Band B								
PS/AO/WO/SM3	0	6	52	39	120	36	0	0
Pay Band C								
AIO/AD01/ADO(WM)(SM)/SO/SWO	0	1	117	10	85	17	0	0
Pay Band D								
IO/HEO/DO/HPTO/MS2	2	1	27	11	32	5	0	0
Pay Band E								
SIO/SEO/IC/SPTO/MS1/SSO	2	1	48	0	49	3	0	0
Pay Band F								
PPTO/G7/PI	2	1	31	2	17	3	0	0
Pay Band G								
Grade 6	1	0	5	0	6	0	0	0
Total	7	10	296	103	388	159	1	0
Ethnic minorities (all grades)	0	0	7	2	4	2	0	0
Part/full time workers (all grades)	0	1	3	27	9	38	0	0

	Box 1	*Box 2*	*Box 3*	*Box 4*
Disabled (all grades-no gender)	0	3	3	0

Letter from Maurice Newey to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

Further to Mr. Meale's Written Answer on this, I am pleased to provide the information requested for Civil Servants in the Vehicle Inspectorate. 707 reports have been received so far.

Table 1 shows these broken down into the various categories used in our Equal Opportunities monitoring process. Table 2–5 show the markings given by Vehicle Inspectorate Pay Band (explained in the Notes to the Tables) for the different categories of staff.

In accordance with Cabinet Office guidance, we have not given information in 2 categories, where numbers total less than 5 and where individuals might be identified.

The Vehicle Inspectorate does not apply the Cabinet Office 4/5ths rule of thumb to its performance appraisal markings. For declared ethnic minority and disabled staff, the numbers are just too small to enable us to make any meaningful or reliable comparisons with other groups—though we are trying to improve the reliability of our

employee database to support our very robust Equal Opportunities policies in these areas. These are already particularly effective in our employment of women, who now make up well over 30% of our workforce and who increasingly are reaching middle and senior level management positions in the Inspectorate. Generally speaking, from reports received so far, a higher proportion of women employees are currently gaining Box 1 and 2 performance markings than their male counterparts.

Please do not hesitate to let me know if you need any further information.

Table 1
Equal opportunities breakdown of reports returned in 1998 reporting year

Band	Total	Male	Female	Disabled	White	Non-participant	Ethnic minorities	Part-time	Full-time
1	98	68	30	1	62	36	0	30	68
2	235	119	116	6	179	53	3	36	199
3	212	190	22	6	182	24	6	2	210
4	117	98	19	0	107	10	0	7	110
5	32	29	3	0	31	1	0	0	32
6	10	8	2	0	10	0	0	0	10
7	3	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	3

Table 2
Performance markings by pay band and ethnic origin

Band	Total	White			Non-participant			
		1	2	3	1	2	3	4/5
1	98	1	31	30	1	16	17	2
2	235	10	120	49	4	34	15	0
3	212	15	113	54	3	12	9	0
4	117	8	66	33	1	5	4	0
5	32	3	21	7	0	1	0	0
6	10	1	6	3	0	0	0	0

Note:
In line with Cabinet Office Guidelines on confidentiality, it is not possible to provide performance markings for other Ethnic Minority categories, as numbers are less than 5.

Table 3
Performance markings by pay band and gender

Band	Total	Male				Female		
		1	2	3	4/5	1	2	3
1	98	2	29	35	2	0	18	12
2	235	5	71	43	0	9	85	22
3	212	15	116	59	0	3	11	8
4	117	7	60	31	0	2	11	6
5	32	2	20	7	0	*	*	0
6	10	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Note:
* Denotes category totalling less than 5, disregarded under Cabinet Office guidelines for safeguarding the identities of individuals.

Table 4
Box markings by pay band and working hours

Band	Total	Part time			Full time			
		1	2	3	1	2	3	4/5
1	98	0	18	12	2	29	35	2
2	235	2	25	9	12	131	56	0
3	212	0	1	0	18	126	67	0
4	117	1	4	2	8	67	35	0
5	32	0	0	0	3	22	7	0
6	10	0	0	0	1	6	3	0

Table 5
Total—all bands

Total	Disabled staff		
	1	2	3
13	0	10	3

Note 1 Vehicle Inspectorate Pay Bands
Band 1 Tester, Administrative Assistant, Handyperson, Typists
Band 2 Administrative Officer, Assistant Vehicle Examiner, Personal Secretaries
Band 3 Executive Officer, Traffic Examiner, Professional and Technical Officer (PTO), Senior Personal Secretaries
Band 4 Higher Executive Officer, Higher PTO, Senior Traffic Examiner
Band 5 Senior Executive Officer, Senior PTO
Band 6 Principal/Unified Grade 7
Band 7 Grade 6/Director

Note 2 Key to VI Performance Marking Scale
Box 1 Outstanding
Box 2 Significantly above normal requirements
Box 3 Meets normal requirements
Box 4 Some improvement necessary
Box 5 Unsatisfactory

Letter from Marcus C. Buck to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

I have been asked by the Secretary of State for the Department of Environment and Transport and the Regions, to provide information regarding the Staff Appraisal Markings for the Centre.

The enclosed schedule details the combined Staff Appraisal Markings for the Centre. It was not possible, (if we are to compile with the Cabinet Office's ruling regarding confidentiality of individuals personal details) to show the information broken down by grade or ethnicity.

The centre does not use the "Four Fifth's Rule". Appraisal forms are audited by the Human Resources Department to ensure fairness and the non-use of discriminatory comments or implications of.

All grades/job bands combined

	Box 1		Box 2		Box 3	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
All staff	—	2	14	16	7	7

Note:
Unrecorded (did not qualify for an Appraisal marking for 98) Male 4, Female 3

Letter from Derek Harvey to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

I attach a table of data for the Vehicle Certification Agency in response to your Parliamentary questions concerning the above.

It has not been possible to provide a gender or ethnicity breakdown in paybands 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7 because, in line with Cabinet Office guidelines, data relating to staff's personal details, when the numbers in any category fall below five, may not be disclosed in order to protect the privacy of individual members of staff.

I can confirm that the four-fifths rule has not been used to check for potential adverse impact.

You will also wish to note that there were no disabled or part-time staff in VCA at the time of the 1998 ASR round, hence no separate columns in the table.

Analysis of pay system

			Gender		Ethnicity	
	Box	Mark	m	f	w	o
Pay band 1	Box 1		—	—	—	—
	Box 2	1	—	—	—	—
	Box 3	10	5	5	—	—
Total		11	—	—	—	—
Pay band 2	Box 1	1	—	—	—	—
	Box 2	10	6	4	—	—
	Box 3	12	7	5	12	—
Total		23	—	—	—	—

Analysis of pay system

			Gender		Ethnicity	
	Box	Mark	m	f	w	o
Pay band 3	Box 1		—	—	—	—
	Box 2	6	—	—	—	—
	Box 3	1	—	—	—	—
Total		7	—	—	—	—
Pay band 4	Box 1	1	—	—	—	—
	Box 2	14	—	—	—	—
	Box 3	13	13	—	13	—
Total		28	—	—	—	—
Pay band 5	Box 1		—	—	—	—
	Box 2	10	10	—	10	—
	Box 3	3	3	—	3	—
Total		13	—	—	—	—
Pay band 6	Box 1		—	—	—	—
	Box 2	2	2	—	2	—
	Box 3	3	3	—	3	—
Total		5	—	—	—	—
Pay band 7	Box 1		—	—	—	—
	Box 2		—	—	—	—
	Box 3		—	—	—	—
Total		1	—	—	—	—
Total		88	—	—	—	—

Note:
1. w/o = White/Other

Letter from Bernard Herdan to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

As Alan Meale promised in his written reply of December 1998, I am now responding to your Parliamentary Question about the 1998 appraisal performance markings for staff in this Agency.

As part of the 1998 Pay Agreement with the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) it was agreed that the settlement date of the annual pay negotiations would change in 1999 to 1 August rather than 1 April. It was also agreed that the annual performance reporting cycle would be brought into line with the new settlement date.

A revised annual report timetable has been agreed with PCS which means that all 1998 reports on DSA staff have been delayed until the first half of 1999. I am therefore unable to provide you with the information you requested for 1998 but I have attached details of appraisal performance markings for all DSA staff relating to the 1997 cycle.

Grade: All staff combined. Period 1 January 1997 to 31 December 1997

	Box 1		Box 2		Box 3		Box 4	
Ethnic origin	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
White	2	3	574	74	431	69	2	2
Ethnic minorities	1	—	3	2	10	14	—	—
Unrecorded non-participant	—	1	23	18	92	57	4	—
Total	3	4	600	94	533	140	6	2
Part-time	—	—	1	8	8	21	—	—
Disabled	—	—	6	—	3	1	—	—

Letter from Bernard Herdan to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

As Alan Meale promised in his written reply of December 1998, I am now responding to your Parliamentary Question about the application of the Cabinet Office's 4/5ths rule to 1998 performance marking for staff in this Agency to check for potential adverse impact.

The 4/5th rule has not been applied in respect of staff in DSA. As you may know the rule is a guideline only, and is not a statistical test. It does not give an assurance that any differences are statistically sound nor prove discrimination one way or the other. However as part of the 1998 Pay Agreement with the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), we have agreed that a full equality proofing exercise will be carried out, jointly between DSA and PCS, on all staff performance reports completed on DSA staff in 1999. Meetings with PCS are scheduled for January 1999 for the equality proofing exercise to commence. The exact method of analysis, which might well include the 4/5th rule as a benchmark, will be agreed between both sides in normal negotiations.

Letter from C. J. Shepley to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your Questions in which you asked:

1. whether, in the 1998 report round, we applied the Cabinet Office's "4/5ths rule" to the performance markings of Inspectorate staff; and

2. what were the appraisal performance markings awarded to Inspectorate staff broken down by (i) grade, (ii) gender, (iii) ethnicity, (iv) part time/full time working and (v) disability.

The answer to your first question is "no".

In answer to your second question I attach a table showing a breakdown of the 1998 performance markings for Inspectorate staff. Where there are fewer than 5 people in the ethnic minority, disability or part-time categories we have suppressed the information in order to maintain the confidentiality of personal information.

Planning Inspectorate
Grade AA/DS/SGB1&2

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	1	1	*	*	*	*	*	*
2A	6	8	*	*	*	*	*	*
2B	8	22	*	*	*	*	*	*
3	14	11	*	*	*	*	*	*
4	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	29	42	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

Grade AO/PS

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	2	4	*	*	*	*	*	*
2A	13	24	*	*	*	*	*	*
2B	28	44	*	*	*	*	*	10
3	20	30	*	*	*	*	*	5
4	1	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	64	102	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

Grade EO/TM/SPS/Planning assistants

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	—	4	*	*	*	*	*	*
2A	11	8	*	*	*	*	*	*
2B	24	27	*	*	*	*	*	5
3	22	6	*	*	*	*	*	*
4	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	57	45	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] included within grade totals
Note:
* = less than 5 people in group

Grade HEO

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	—	1	*	*	*	*	*	*
2A	6	6	*	*	*	*	*	*
2B	10	5	*	*	*	*	*	*
3	7	3	*	*	*	*	*	*

Grade HEO

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
4	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	23	15	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

Grade SEO

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	1	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
2A	2	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
2B	9	1	*	*	*	*	*	*
3	5	1	*	*	*	*	*	*
4	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	17	2	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

Grade G6/7 (grades combined to preserve anonymity)

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
2A	3	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
2B	3	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
3	2	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
4	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	7	—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Included within grade totals

Grade: Housing and planning inspector

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
2	17	2	*	*	*	*	*	*
3	20	4	*	*	*	*	*	*
4	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	37	6	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

Grade: Senior housing and planning inspector

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	2	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
2	99	7	*	*	5	*	8	*
3	24	5	*	*	*	*	*	*
4	1	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	126	12	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

Grade: Principal housing and planning inspector

Performance mark	Male	Female	Ethnicity m	Ethnicity f	Disability m	Disability f	Part time m	Part time f
1	3	1	*	*	*	*	*	*
2	30	2	*	*	*	*	*	*
3	1	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
4	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
5	—	—	*	*	*	*	*	*
Total in Grade	34	3	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Included within grade totals

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 12 January 1999:

I refer to your written Parliamentary Questions, Nos 64803 and 64825, which were tabled for answer by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I have been asked to reply to you with regard to information relating to the Highways Agency.

In reply to PQ 64803 we are in the process of completing the Agency's annual exercise which monitors the way in which appraisal and performance marks have been awarded. We expect to have this work completed by the end of January and I hope you will agree that it would be best that I should write to you again when the information is available.

In reply to PQ 64825 we use our own formula to determine whether there is any potential adverse impact on a particular group. This involves comparing the mean average performance mark for each group which we round up or down to the nearest whole number. If a particular group has a lower whole number than another group, this would merit further investigation.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many civil servants in each grade in DETR (C), broken down by *(a)* gender, *(b)* ethnicity, *(c)* part/full time working and *(d)* disability, will be paid performance-related pay if it is agreed to make a second-stage payment based on performance markings arising from the 1998 appraisal round. [64924]

Mr. Meale: If it is decided that the 1998 Settlement is to be differentiated according to performance then all staff with a C marking will get at least 2.8 per cent. whilst all those with a B2 will get 3.4 per cent.; all those with a B1 will get 4.0 per cent. and all those with an A will get 4.6 per cent., subject to an increase of at least 3.5 per cent. inclusive of any element for restructuring, which also formed part of this year's settlement.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the performance markings for civil servants in DETR (C) in each grade were in 1998, broken down by *(a)* gender, *(b)* ethnicity, *(c)* part/full time working and *(d)* disability; [64926]

(2) what were in each grade the promotability markings awarded in the 1998 appraisal round for civil servants in DETR (C), broken down by gender, race and disability. [64920]

Mr. Meale: The performance and promotion data from the 1997–98 appraisal round analysed by my Department have been placed in the Library. In some areas it has not been possible to produce detailed breakdowns by grade without potentially revealing the identity of individual members of staff. In these cases data fields have been marked 'X' to maintain the confidentiality of individual staff records.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what equal opportunity training civil servants in DETR(C) received before the introduction of the present appraisal system. [64919]

Mr. Meale: Awareness of equal opportunities issues and avoiding discrimination and bias forms an integral part of the Department's training courses. Both former Departments' appraisal systems were introduced with training programmes covering equal opportunities issues, as did the refresher training for all staff in the new DETR(C) appraisal system.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions where were in each of the last five years the performance markings of civil servants in the predecessor bodies to DETR(C), broken down by *(a)* grade, *(b)* gender, *(c)* ethnicity, *(d)* part/full time working and *(e)* disability. [64925]

Mr. Meale: This information, relating to appraisal systems which have now been superseded, cannot be provided in the format requested without incurring disproportionate costs.

Rural Action

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that Rural Action continues beyond its current funding cut off date of 31 March 1999. [64831]

Mr. Meale: Rural Action for the Environment was established with funding from the Rural Development Commission, the Countryside Commission and English Nature to cover the scheme's initial three-year development phase until 31 March 1995. Following the successful completion of this phase, the three agencies extended their funding until 31 March 1999. By that point it was expected that Rural Action would no longer need to rely on Government funding.

Two of the funding agencies—the Rural Development Commission and the Countryside Commission—are due to merge on 1 April to form the Countryside Agency. Both they and, provisionally, English Nature have agreed to commit sufficient funds in 1999–2000 to support the monitoring and advisory costs of the Rural Action county networks which help administer the scheme. This will help to safeguard Rural Action by putting it in the best possible position to bid for project funding, while allowing the new Countryside Agency, together with English Nature, time to consider the scheme and make a decision on its longer term future.

I welcome this approach.

Packaging Waste Regulations

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change the recovery targets under the packaging waste regulations for 1999. [65266]

Mr. Meacher: Proposals for changing the recovery targets were included in the recent consultation paper, the Review Of The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997, published on 30 July 1998. I have had further advice from the Advisory Committee on Packaging, on this and on other issues covered in the review, as set out in Sir Peter Parker's letter to me on 22 December 1998, copies of which I am placing in the Library.

Basking Sharks

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will propose the inclusion of the basking shark in Appendix II of CITES; and if he will make a statement; [65354]

(2) if he will set out the current timetable relating to CITES, indicating the deadlines for extending inclusion to the basking shark; [65342]

(3) if he will make a statement on the removal of the EU reservation in respect of the Bern Convention's listing of basking sharks in the Mediterranean; [65370]

(4) if he will make a statement on the impact of the Barcelona Convention on the status of the basking shark. [65369]

Mr. Meale: The next CITES Conference is due to be held from 10 to 20 April 2000. The text of proposals to amend the appendices has to be communicated to the CITES Secretariat at least 150 days before the meeting, ie by 12 November 1999.

My Department is giving active consideration to the case for including the basking shark on Appendix II of CITES. A proposal prepared by Wildlife and Countryside Link has recently been sent to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee for their assessment as the Government's scientific advisers.

The UK is not a Party to the Barcelona Convention. The European Community reservation in respect of addition of the basking shark to Appendix II of the Bern Convention is due to be reconsidered when the Natura 2000 network is completed and there is a prospect of amending the annexes to the Habitats Directive.

Marine Pollution

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on the phrase, "historic levels", in paragraph 15 of the Sintra statement issued by the ministerial meeting of the OSPAR Commission; [65292]

(2) what proposals he has to reduce concentrations in the marine environment of man-made radioactive substances. [65293]

Mr. Meacher: To meet our obligation under the OSPAR radioactive substances strategy the UK must, by 2020, reduce discharges to levels which will add negligible amounts to historic concentrations of radioactive substances in the marine environment. The ultimate aim is concentrations of man-made radioactive substances close to zero.

My department and the regulatory authorities will be working closely with the nuclear operators who will be producing 20 year strategies for implementing these discharge reductions.

The term "historic levels" refers to concentrations of radioactive substances in the marine environment, resulting from past discharges into the sea, which have yet to decay naturally to zero.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of the impact of *(a)* the 6 per cent. fuel duty escalator, *(b)* full take up of local transport measures in areas greater than 25 km2, *(c)* full take up of local transport measures in London and in 1/3 of all areas greater than 25 km2 and *(d)* strict enforcement of 70 mph speed limit on national traffic levels in the models used to calculate the carbon dioxide emissions savings given in the table on page 38 of the UK Climate Change Programme; [64995]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of cities which could reduce their road traffic carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. as described in paragraph 2.59 of the New Deal for Transport; and what changes to traffic levels, based on 1990 levels, such reductions would imply *(a)* in those cities and *(b)* nationally; [64989]

(3) what forecast he has made of the levels of traffic reduction which would occur in *(a)* the urban areas concerned and *(b)* nationally if local authorities in cities at least the size of Southampton acted to reduce road traffic carbon dioxide by 0.8 MtC by 2010, as set out in paragraph 114 of the UK Climate Change Programme. [64994]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The UK Climate Change Programme Consultation paper and "A New Deal For Transport: Better for Everyone", published last year, presented estimates of the environmental savings which could potentially be achieved through the introduction of a package of local transport measures which were outlined in "A New Deal For Transport". These estimates included only those measures where the impact could be easily quantified, which included central area cordon charges and complementary public transport improvements. Other measures in "A New Deal for Transport" which are less easy to quantify would add to these savings.

The estimates were derived using the 1997 National Road Traffic Forecasts framework in conjunction with information on the potential impact of the transport measures derived from more specific local transport models. The analysis suggested that savings of up to 20 per cent. in road traffic carbon dioxide emissions could be made in the centre of the busiest cities. Nationally, this translates into a saving of 0.3 to 0.8 MtC by 2010 depending on the number of cities in which the packages of measures were introduced.

These estimates were presented relative to a baseline which incorporated the expected impact of the 6 per cent. fuel duty escalator. It is estimated that the continuation of this policy for the lifetime of the current parliament could reduce national traffic levels by 2 per cent. compared with what they would otherwise have been in 2010.

If there was full take up of the package of local transport measures in urban areas greater than 25 km^2 (such as cities the size of Southampton or larger) it is estimated that this could reduce national traffic levels by a further 2 per cent. on the forecast level by 2010, and by around 20 per cent. in the centre of the urban areas concerned. Alternatively, if the measures were only introduced in London and a third of urban areas greater than 25 km^2 national traffic could be expected to be reduced by around 1 per cent. on its forecast level. The traffic, and carbon dioxide, reduction which could be expected in specific individual cities would depend on the exact form in which the measures were introduced, and on the particular characteristics of each city and its population. It is therefore not possible to estimate the precise number of cities where savings of 20 per cent. could be achieved.

The Climate Change Programme Consultation paper also presents an estimate for the potential carbon dioxide savings which could be achieved through the strict enforcement of 70 mph speed limits. The analysis underlying this estimate was based on survey information of the extent and severity of speeding, and an assessment of the emissions saving from reducing such activity. The analysis could not be used to predict what impact the enforcement of speed limits would have on traffic levels.

The answer I gave the hon. Member on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *458*, indicated that my Department will be undertaking further analysis of the impact of the New Deal policies on road traffic—taking into account information from local authorities on what measures they plan to introduce—in the context of preparing reports under the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what level of traffic, expressed as a percentage of traffic levels in 1990, has been assumed to calculate the 22 to 27 per cent. reduction in forecast road traffic carbon dioxide emissions by 2010 referred to in paragraph 2.26 of the New Deal for Transport. [64990]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The reduction in road transport carbon dioxide emissions of 22 to 27 per cent. which was presented in "A New Deal For Transport: Better for Everyone" was estimated relative to energy projections which were published by the Department for Trade and Industry in 1995. The reduction includes the impact of a number of policy measures including the 6 per cent. fuel duty escalator, the EU Strategy to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from new cars, and the potential impact of those local transport measures which were quantified in A New Deal for Transport. In addition, the figures were also influenced by the switch to the use of the 1997 National Road Traffic Forecast modelling framework as a tool for estimating transport carbon dioxide emissions.

Using the National Road Traffic Forecasts model, it is estimated that with these policies in place traffic would grow by 37 per cent. by 2010 relative to 1990 vehicle kilometre levels. This analysis assumes that the improvements in energy efficiency which arise from the EU Strategy to reduce carbon dioxide from cars would not lead to offsetting increases in vehicle use. As indicated in my answer to question number 64989, further analysis on the impact of the measures contained within A New Deal for Transport on traffic levels is planned.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the amount which road traffic levels would need to be reduced in order to reduce road traffic carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. by 2010, on 1990 levels. [64991]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The publication of the Climate Change Programme Consultation paper in October 1998 began the national debate on how to meet our legally binding Kyoto target, and how we can move beyond this towards a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. Part of this national debate will focus on how specific sectors of the economy, including the transport sector, can contribute towards meeting our climate change targets.

Carbon dioxide levels could be reduced from the transport sector in a number of ways, each having different implications for traffic levels. Until it is clear how the transport sector will contribute to meeting our climate change targets it is not possible to provide an overall assessment of how traffic levels will be affected by the contribution.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the reduction in carbon dioxide from *(a)* road freight transport and *(b)* private car use on a 1990 base by 2010; and what proportion of this reduction would be (i) as a result of improvements in engine efficiency and (ii) from reductions in the number of lorry-kilometres travelled. [64992]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Forecasts of the change in carbon dioxide emissions from different parts of the road transport sector can be made using the National Road Traffic Forecasts modelling framework which was published in 1997. This model can be used to split changes in emissions over time between changes in underlying energy efficiency and vehicle use, but only from a base year of 1996.

Assuming that fuel duty is increased by 6 per cent. per annum in real terms for the lifetime of the current Parliament, and that no other policies are introduced, between 1996 and 2010 it is forecast that total carbon dioxide emissions from cars will grow by 6 per cent. This growth is made up of two counterbalancing effects. Over the period, vehicle kilometres are forecast to increase leading to a growth in carbon dioxide emissions of up to 28 per cent. This is offset by improvements which are forecast in the underlying energy efficiency of vehicles which is expected to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by around 22 per cent.

It is forecast that carbon dioxide emissions from road freight between 1996 and 2010 will increase by around 3 per cent. This change is made up of a forecast improvement in underlying energy efficiency of up to 18 per cent., which is offset by an expected increase in vehicle use of up to 22 per cent. This analysis is based on the assumption that the efficiency of Heavy Goods Vehicles improves by one per cent. per year.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes in traffic levels, expressed as a percentage of 1990 levels, was assumed in order to calculate the carbon dioxide emissions forecast for 2010 from road traffic given in paragraph 127 of the UK Climate Change Programme. [64993]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The forecast of carbon dioxide emissions from road traffic given in the Climate Change Programme Consultation paper was estimated using the National Road Traffic Forecasts which were published in 1997. This forecast does not include the impact of the policies which were outlined in A New Deal for Transport. Relative to total traffic levels in 1990, the central forecasts predict that total vehicle kilometres will grow by 40 per cent. by 2010.

Traffic Congestion

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what

assessment his Department has made of the consequences for congestion of the introduction of night-time rules for mobile workers in the EU Working Time Directive. [64982]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The European Commission's draft proposal was published only in December. We will examine it thoroughly taking into account the effects on road transport and congestion and seek to ensure in negotiations on the draft directive that sensible and balanced decisions are reached.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the relative damage caused to roads by *(a)* 38 tonne lorries, *(b)* 40 tonne lorries and *(c)* 44 tonne lorries with standard axle arrangements. [64983]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As indicated in the recent White Paper on the future of transport, "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone", 38 tonne, 5 axle lorries and 44 tonne, 6 axle lorries, both with drive axle weights of up to 10.5 tonnes, cause about the same amount of road wear. 40 tonne, 5 axle lorries, which have an 11.5 tonne drive axle weight, cause about a third more wear than the aforementioned.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many 44 tonne lorries are licensed to operate on United Kingdom roads. [64984]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The number of vehicles licensed to operate at 44 tonnes on combined transport operations at 30 September 1998 was 2,560. This figure does not include a number of vehicles licensed under Section 44 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 to carry abnormal and indivisible loads, and which may operate at weights at or above 44 tonnes.

New Deal (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made on the New Deal for communities in Liverpool. [63564]

Mr. Caborn: We have received an outline bid on behalf of the Kensington Partnership Forum for New Deal for Communities support. The bid covers parts of the Smithdown and Kensington Wards of the City. No decisions has yet been reached on which of the 17 Pathfinder bids will progress to the next stage. I expect to make an announcement shortly.

Bus Companies

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received in the last 12 months about bus company mergers and take-overs. [63408]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Mergers and take-overs in the bus industry are chiefly matters for the competition authorities. However I do receive such representations from time to time, including the letter of 26 October last from my hon. Friend.

London Underground

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made towards the injection of private capital into the infrastructure of London Transport Underground. [63563]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are making very good progress, as my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 14 December 1998, *Official Report,* columns 623–34, during the second reading debate on the Greater London Authority Bill. Work is now under way to restructure London Underground in preparation for a competition to be held for the private sector to operate and invest in the upgrading of the Underground's infrastructure, into an operations company, which will remain in the public sector, and three infrastructure divisions. Subject to bids for the infrastructure divisions representing Best Value for the public sector they will transfer to the private sector for the duration of the Public-Private Partnership.

Opencast Mining

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning planning permission for opencast mining at Avenue Cokeworks, Wingerworth, Derbyshire. [63577]

Mr. Caborn: Since 1 May 1997 my right hon. Friend has received six representations from local pressure groups and 11 representations from members of the public requesting that the planning application be called in.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 13 January 1999

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Archive Collections

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what provision he has made in respect of archive collections in the context of the merger of the Museum and Galleries Commission and the Library and Information Commission. [65303]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The funding allocations for the new Museums, Libraries and Archives Council for the years 2000–01 and 2001–02 were set out in the document "A New Cultural Framework" which was placed in the Libraries of the House on 14 December 1998. Allocation of funds to particular areas of responsibility will be a decision for the board members of the new body.

TREASURY

Invest to Save Budget

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what projects have secured funding from the Invest to Save Budget. [65564]

Mr. Milburn: The Invest to Save Budget (ISB) was set up to help develop projects which bring together two or more public service bodies to deliver services in an innovative and efficient fashion. Overall provision for the ISB has been increased from £150m to £230m and, from that sum, £120m has been allocated to 33 projects following the first bidding round. The additional £80m allocated to the ISB will enable the programme to fund the new Single Work Focused Gateway. The full list of winning projects and the amounts allocated to each are set out in the following table:

Lead department	*Project*	*Funding provided (£ million)*
Scottish Office	Scottish legal database enabling electronic access within the public sector legislation and case law.	0.210
Scottish Office	Pilot project using multi-agency teams to identify young people at risk of offending	0.451
Scottish Office	Integration of planning and delivery of health and social services for community care clients	0.982
Scottish Office	Integration of probation and employment services for offenders	0.450
Northern Ireland Office	Criminal justice system IT information systems	0.800
Northern Ireland Office	Pilot prison to court video link for pre-trial, remand or bail hearings	0.050
Valuation Office	Electronic transfer of data from the Valuation Office to local authorities	0.120
Public Record Office	Developing a common specification for management of electronic records held by Government	0.133
Inland Revenue	Use of IT in selected cases to present documentary evidence in tax prosecutions	1.936
Inland Revenue	Project exploring the potential for an on-line self-service facility offering access to cross-governmental information	0.210
Home Office	Electronic links between authorised criminal justice agencies and the Police National Computer	1.320
Home Office	Electronic sharing of information by criminal justice agencies in Sussex	0.394
Health	Pilot joint call handling centres (police, ambulance, fire and rescue services)	7.800
DSS	Pilot of new ways of integrating the services provided to pensioners	0.804
DSS	Benefit fraud prevention, deterrence and detection pilot project	0.451
DSS	Investigation of the potential for the joint administration of a range of benefits provided by central and local government	0.135
Cabinet Office, Better Regulation Unit	IT system piloting one stop shop for regulatory services run by local authorities	0.100
Land Registry	Development of electronic database providing on-line information on land and property	3.273
DETR	Information systems links between Vehicle Inspectorate and Magistrates Courts	0.092
DETR	Two pilots testing out feasibility of allowing drivers to apply for vehicle tax disc applications by electronic means	0.279
ONS	Study exploring the role of a single business register across central and local government	0.440
ONS	Merger of Family Expenditure and National Food Surveys	0.355
DfEE	Single Work Focused Gateway	79.5
DfEE	Schools and local education authority information management strategy	0.225
DfEE	Pilot project testing the scope for delivering a range of Employment Service and Benefits Agency services through a call centre	2.912
DfEE	Pilot programme developing an inter-agency response to the needs of disaffected young people and trialing the use of youth advocates	0.200
Ordnance Survey	Study of scope for standardising geospatial information held by government and making it accessible to other parts of government and the public	0.300

Lead department	Project	Funding provided (£ million)
Department of Finance and Personnel, Northern Ireland	Common computerised bureau enabling departments to use electronic catalogues to purchase goods and services	1.357
Department of Finance and Personnel, Northern Ireland	Electronic transfer of prescription data between GPs, the Social Security Agency, pharmacists and government	2.100
Department of Finance and Personnel, Northern Ireland	Self service electronic kiosks providing access to labour market and benefits information	0.200
Department of Finance and Personnel, Northern Ireland	Electronic network providing access to information held on vehicles by various agencies	0.356
DCMS	Study of feasibility of establishing an integrated public transport and tourist information electronic database	0.050
Welsh Office	Provision of range of agricultural and other services for rural communities via 'one stop shops' and improvement of payments system for farmers	11.96

World Bank

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has taken to the World Bank, as a member of its board, to provide protection for developing countries from financial speculators. [62768]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* As Chairman of the G7 Finance Ministers, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 30 October 1998 a far-reaching programme of reforms to strengthen the international financial system. On behalf of the G7, the Chancellor called on the World Bank, IMF and other international institutions to take forward work quickly on implementing these reforms, including the development by the World Bank of a code of general principles of good practice on social policy to ensure that governments have in place policies to tackle the social impact of sudden shocks to the financial system. In addition, the UK and other G7 countries committed themselves to strengthening in their own countries the regulatory focus on risk management in financial organisations, including in particular the implications arising from the operation of hedge funds and other highly leveraged financial organisations.

These reforms agreed by the G7 are designed to modernise the financial system to enable us to meet the challenges of today's global economy, minimise the risks of disruption, and maximise the benefits of globalisation to deliver greater opportunity and prosperity for all. The Chancellor recently met James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, and Michel Camdessus, Managing Director of the IMF, to discuss the implementation of these reforms and will continue to work closely with them on these issues.

Road Charging

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if charges levied in respect of *(a)* road pricing and *(b)* workplace charging will be subject to VAT. [63640]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* As the recent consultation document "Breaking the logjam" issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions said, there may be VAT implications for road user and workplace parking charges. A case is to be heard by the European Court of Justice on the VAT treatment of toll charges, and the outcome of this case will determine whether road user charges should bear VAT.

Single Currency (Convergence)

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the period which will be required for the UK economy to demonstrate sustainable convergence before entry into a single currency can take place. [65098]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* In his statement to the House of Commons on 27 October 1997, *Official Report,* columns 583–606, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that, barring some fundamental and unforeseen change in economic circumstances, there is no realistic prospect of the UK economy having demonstrated, before the end of this Parliament, convergence which is sustainable and settled rather than transitory. It is essential that Government and business prepare during this Parliament, to create a genuine option of joining a successful single currency early in the next Parliament.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families, broken down by family income, are likely to receive both the working families tax credit and housing benefit. [64674]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates for 1999–2000 of the number of families in receipt of both the Working Families Tax Credit and Housing Benefit are given in the table.

Gross weekly family income	Number of families
Less than £60	50,000
£60-£99.99	75,000
£100-£149.99	50,000
£150 and over	50,000
Total	225,000

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the numbers of families who will be eligible for the working families tax credit, and their average net pay, comprising *(a)* a male as the main earner and their partner and *(b)* a female as the main earner and their partner, with in each case (i) one child, (ii) two children, (iii) three children and (iv) four or more children under eight years of age. [64227]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that estimates at this level of detail are not available.

Golf Clubs (VAT)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will review the provisions of the Value Added Tax (Sport, Sports Competition and Physical Education) Order 1998 to resolve the different VAT treatment of private and proprietary golf clubs. [65161]

Dawn Primarolo: The Order, which was designed to prevent tax avoidance, was withdrawn and an announcement about a replacement will be made as soon as possible. The Government understand the problems of both types of golf club and have arranged for HM Customs and Excise to discuss these with the European Commission, in the light of the recent European Court of Justice ruling in Commission of the European Communities vs the Kingdom of Spain (Case C-124/96, Judgment of the Court, Sixth Chamber, of 7 May 1998).

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms Compensation

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many claims for compensation are outstanding under each option in the large and small calibre firearms compensation schemes; what is the average amount of time taken to process a claim under each option; when he expects all claims under each category to have been completed; and if he will make a statement. [64953]

Mr. Boateng: Payments under Options A and B of the compensation schemes for large calibre handguns and small calibre pistols have been completed, apart from a small number of cases still under inquiry, in an average processing time of 21 weeks. The average processing time for claims processed so far under Option C of the schemes is 58 weeks. There are around 16,500 claims awaiting payment offers under Option C, and the aim is to complete these by the end of March if at all possible. In the great majority of these cases, payments have already been made under Options A and B.

I outlined the measures we are taking to speed the processing of these compensation claims in my reply to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on 28 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *179–80.*

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many firearms have been surrendered under the terms of the Firearms (Amendment) Acts 1997; and what has been the cost to the Exchequer to date. [65237]

Mr. Boateng: A total of 162,198 large and small-calibre handguns were surrendered, £67.2 million has so far been paid in compensation.

Young Offenders

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of the prison population was under the age of 21 years on 30 December. [65290]

Mr. George Howarth: The currently available information relates to the population on the last day of November 1998. On that date, 16 per cent. of the prison population in England and Wales were aged under 21 years.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the education facilities that are available to young people of school age who are serving sentences in prisons in England and Wales. [65288]

Mr. George Howarth: There is a statutory requirement to provide prisoners under the age of 17 years with 15 hours academic education including English, mathematics, life skills relevant to their age, and information technology together with a minimum of 5 hours physical education.

Prison education for all prisoners focuses on the core curriculum of basic educational skills (literacy and numeracy), life and social skills and computer skills.

The Prison Service is currently developing new regime standards for young people under the age of 18. They will include the development of a broader education curriculum for young people under school leaving age which will take into account their particular learning difficulties, especially dyslexia, attention deficits and hyper-activity disorder and any statement of educational needs. The comprehensive spending review has made additional funds available for achieving the new standards.

The Prison Service is also planning to introduce an individual programme for each young person. It will be based on a thorough assessment and will include an action plan and programme suited to individual needs, ability and aptitude.

Prisoners (Self-harm)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many recorded incidents there were in prisons in England and Wales of inmates causing self-harm in the last years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [65289]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of self-harm incidents reported by Prison Service establishments in the three years between 1995–96 and 1997–98 is set out in the table. Some caution is required in interpreting the table. A number of factors influence the pattern of figures across establishments and time. For instance, there would be a higher volume of prisoners associated with local prisons and a single disturbed prisoner can be responsible for a large number of self-harm incidents in any one year.

The Prison Service is developing a range of measures to reduce levels of self-harm including: reviewing screening processes to identify those at risk; sharing good practice; improving cell design to produce a safer environment; and conducting research into suicide and self-injury.

The Government take a particular interest in this important area of work. My noble Friend Lord Williams chairs a regular meeting between the Prison Service and a range of representatives from groups interested in prison suicides. These include: the Samaritans; Howard League; Prison Reform Trust; Inquest and the Board of Visitors. The meetings are held to discuss how the Prison Service and these groups can work more closely together to try to reduce the rate of suicides and instances of self-harm.

We welcome the current thematic review of suicide and self-harm conducted by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons and look forward to seeing his report which is soon to be published.

Incidents of self-harm in Prison Service establishments

Prison	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Acklington	20	23	14
Albany	4	11	11
Aldington	0	0	1
Altcourse	n/a	n/a	11
Ashwell	15	3	2
Askham Grange	5	4	4
Aylesbury	21	18	32
Bedford	0	18	39
Belmarsh	138	26	143
Birmingham	238	77	84
Blakenhurst	23	29	53
Blantyre House	0	0	0
Blundeston	10	24	19
Brinsford	301	157	90
Bristol	59	52	64
Brixton	53	34	70
Brockhill	1	11	69
Buckley Hall	38	12	11
Bullingdon	49	43	47
Bullwood Hall	312	0	97
Camp Hill	15	11	9
Canterbury	14	9	17
Cardiff	123	78	77
Castington	12	13	13
Channings Wood	17	11	15
Chelmsford	56	147	136
Colchester	n/a	n/a	0
Coldingley	0	2	0
Cookham Wood	49	46	23
Dartmoor	44	47	78
Deerbolt	166	114	87
Doncaster	639	288	599
Dorchester	0	28	30
Dover	8	9	10
Downview	2	4	2
Drake Hall	5	14	9
Durham	207	13	168
East Sutton Park	3	1	0
Eastwood Park	61	176	95
Elmley	49	243	339
Erlestoke	6	3	0
Everthorpe	10	46	20
Exeter	0	21	103
Featherstone	8	27	26
Feltham	532	241	292
Ford	1	0	0
Foston Hall	n/a	n/a	3
Frankland	52	32	30
Full Sutton	46	33	14
Garth	14	28	27
Gartree	37	9	6
Glen Parva	80	79	136
Gloucester	29	47	24
Grendon/Spring Hill	15	14	8
Guys Marsh	8	22	28
Haslar	4	12	6
Hatfield	0	4	1
Haverigg	5	7	4
Hewell Grange	0	1	0
Highdown	66	44	56
Highpoint	32	2	53
Hindley	74	40	79
Hollesley Bay	61	19	41
Holloway	192	139	252
Holme House	82	154	127
Hull	128	90	103
Huntercombe	12	6	18

Incidents of self-harm in Prison Service establishments

Prison	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Kingston	0	8	1
Kirkham	1	2	7
Kirklevington	0	0	0
Lancaster	5	4	5
Lancaster Farms	67	33	31
Latchmere House	0	0	0
Leeds	57	59	95
Leicester	25	25	106
Lewes	21	16	30
Leyhill	0	1	1
Lincoln	53	208	87
Lindholme	9	8	7
Littlehey	14	38	41
Liverpool	72	127	130
Long Lartin	22	36	43
Low Newton	109	47	65
Lowdham Grange	n/a	n/a	1
Maidstone	3	13	17
Manchester	98	86	35
Moorland	54	42	93
Morton Hall	0	1	0
Mount, The	5	16	2
New Hall	260	116	190
North Sea Camp	0	0	1
Northallerton	61	61	47
Norwich	65	76	58
Nottingham	7	2	66
Onley	100	49	75
Oxford	0	0	n/a
Parkhurst	46	2	14
Pentonville	71	51	41
Portland	25	31	16
Prescoed	2	0	0
Preston	29	67	100
Ranby	11	30	41
Reading	54	70	72
Risley	168	128	190
Rochester	8	15	34
Send	0	0	1
Shepton Mallet	9	8	9
Shrewsbury	18	33	38
Stafford	44	35	32
Standford Hill	2	0	1
Stocken	12	9	15
Stoke Heath	61	50	61
Styal	108	92	96
Sudbury	1	1	4
Swaleside	31	9	7
Swansea	37	61	133
Swinfen Hall	8	32	13
Thorn Cross	8	3	1
Usk	16	1	0
Verne, The	8	6	11
Wakefield	18	24	22
Wandsworth	156	168	307
Wayland	73	25	23
Wealstun	2	2	5
Weare	n/a	n/a	12
Wellingborough	0	0	7
Werrington	15	11	25
Wetherby	48	52	24
Whatton	3	1	3
Whitemoor	0	45	49
Winchester	9	36	26
Wolds	37	30	32
Woodhill	146	155	155
Wormwood Scrubs	20	85	118
Wymott	7	15	26
Total	6,670	5,373	7,023

Racist Attacks

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has had from *(a)* the Runnymede Trust, *(b)* the Maimonides Foundation and *(c)* the Calanos Foundation about increased racist attacks following military action against Iraq. [65375]

Mr. Boateng: I have received no representations from the Runnymede Trust, the Maimonides Foundation or the Calanos Foundation on this matter.

Passports

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on current practice concerning the return of passports to those who make applications. [65167]

Kate Hoey: The Immigration and Nationality Directorate's (IND) normal practice is to return passports by second class post when the application has been decided. Applicants may of course ask for passports to be returned earlier, to collect them personally, or may stipulate and pay for alternative delivery arrangements. As the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) explained in his letter of 18 November last to hon. Members, IND is currently undergoing major organisational changes aimed at improving the way it handles casework. Urgent work, including the return of passports to applicants for travel, has continued to receive priority treatment during this transitional period, but the upheaval associated with the process of change has impacted upon the service IND is able to provide to applicants. IND is currently unable to expedite the cases of applicants wishing to travel; passports required urgently for travel during the brief transitional period will therefore be returned unendorsed.

Passports submitted to the Passport Agency for renewal are returned to applicants having been cancelled when their applications have been processed. These are returned by first class post unless the applicant requests and pays for delivery by registered post. In exceptional circumstances applicants are not required to leave behind their existing passports while obtaining a renewal. If they call into an Office the passport can be checked and handed back. When the new passport is collected the existing one can be cancelled. New passports are normally sent out using first class post. The passports of customers calling in person at the Agency's Offices are returned by first class post except when applicants are travelling urgently and prefer to collect their passports. The Passport Agency asks customers to apply for passports at least one month ahead of their travel dates although normally properly completed applications are processed within 10 working days of receipt.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many passports were lost by the Home Office in 1998 and what compensation was paid as a result. [65166]

Kate Hoey: The available records show that ex-gratia payments totalling £11,256 were made or offered in 1998 in respect of 69 claims for passports or other documents lost in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate.

Information on passports lost in the Passport Agency's offices is not recorded, but such loss is extremely rare. Lost passports and documents submitted in support of passport applications are replaced free of charge to the applicant.

Drugs Misuse (Promotional Literature)

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the *(a)* publication and *(b)* availability of literature which encourages drugs misuse. [63745]

Mr. George Howarth: Encouragement of the misuse of drugs is always to be deplored. The publication of material which incites its readers to misuse drugs may constitute an offence under section 19 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

If the hon. Member is aware of any literature which may constitute an offence, if he refers it to me, I will draw it to the attention of the appropriate authorities.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Prepaid Envelopes

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee how much was spent on prepaid envelopes for hon. and right hon. Members in each financial year since 1980. [65640]

Mrs. Roe: This is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms; I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Christmas Lunches

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee whose decision it was to offer free Christmas lunches to parliamentary staff. [65081]

Mr. Dennis Turner: It was the decision of the Director of Catering Services to offer a free Christmas lunch to all passholders taking lunch in Refreshment Department Cafeterias. I endorse fully her decision, as I consider it to be a small gesture by which to thank all staff, whether House or of hon. Members, for their help and support throughout the year.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Visit (Lancaster and Wyre)

Q17. **Mr. Dawson:** To ask the Prime Minister when he intends to visit the Lancaster and Wyre constituency. [63766]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what contact he has had with Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates about the bombing raids on Iraq. [65383]

The Prime Minister: I sent messages to Sheikh Zayed once military action had started and once it had ended, explaining our thinking on Iraq. Our Embassy in Abu Dhabi remained in close contact with key members of the U.A.E. Government throughout the period of military action.

WALES

Local Government Finance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is for each county in Wales the percentage increase in external support for revenue programmes from 1998–99 to 1999–2000. [65302]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The percentage increases in external support towards standard spending assessments between 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are shown in the following table.

Percentage increase in external support towards Standard Spending Assessments between 1998–99 and 1999–2000 [1,2]

	Percentage
Isle of Anglesey	3.7
Gwynedd	2.9
Conwy	6.6
Denbighshire	5.8
Flintshire	5.6
Wrexham	4.9
Powys	5.5
Ceredigion	4.1
Pembrokeshire	5.7
Carmarthenshire	5.3
Swansea	4.2
Neath Port Talbot	4.4
Bridgend	5.7
The Vale of Glamorgan	5.9
Rhondda Cynon Taff	4.7
Merthyr Tydfil	5.1
Caerphilly	5.1
Blaenau Gwent	4.2
Torfaen	5.8
Monmouthshire	5.9
Newport	4.4
Cardiff	7.6
All county and county boroughs	5.2

[1] External support towards standard spending assessments includes revenue support grant, re-distributed non-domestic rates and council tax reduction scheme grant.

[2] Increases are between external support towards standard spending assessments for 1998–99, as set out in the Local Government Finance (Amendment) Report (Wales) 1998–99 which has yet to be debated by the House of Commons, and provisional 1999–2000 figures as announced by the Secretary of State for Wales on 14 December 1998.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the total cost to local government in Wales in 1999–2000 of the 2 per cent. increase in employees' pension contribution rates; and if he will make a statement. [65262]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: No. Any increase in costs will depend on individual authorities' decisions on staffing levels. My right hon. Friend has taken into account local government's own view of need to spend in 1999–2000 in making his proposals for local government revenue spending; details of which were announced on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *229–30*, and 14 December 1998, columns *390–91*.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Emphysema

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will indicate *(a)* what has been the total cost to date, including legal costs, of devising a compensation scheme for miners suffering from chronic bronchitis emphysema, *(b)* when he expects a scheme to be operative and *(c)* what is the number of cases currently formally lodged with solicitors. [64700]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 11 January 1999]*: *(a)* Since the judgment was handed down in January last year some £900,000 has been incurred by Department advisers, including principally Counsel, external solicitors and medical experts. The costs of DTI staff and of staff working for IRISC, the Department's claim handler, on this work cannot be separately identified.

(b) Significant progress has been made in recent weeks in negotiations between the Department and the plaintiffs' solicitors on agreeing the arrangements for handling the many thousands of claims from miners or their widows. I am optimistic a final agreement on a medical assessment procedure to establish the levels of injury and the resulting disability will be reached in the near future. There will need to be a tendering process for the required medical services. A national programme of spirometry (lung function testing) will begin by the spring which should enable us to make significant numbers of interim offers. Full and final settlements based on the full medical assessment process should start to flow early in the second half of 1999.

(c) As at 1 January some 65,000 claims have been received by IRISC, the Department's claim handlers. We do not know how many further claims may be lodged with claimants' solicitors.

Vibration White Finger

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will state *(a)* what has been the cost to date, including the legal costs, of devising a compensation scheme for miners suffering from vibration white finger, *(b)* when he expects a scheme to be operative and *(c)* what is the number of cases currently informally lodged with solicitors. [64699]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 11 January 1999]*: *(a)* Since the judgment was handed down in September 1997 some £1.1 million has been incurred by Departmental advisers, including principally Counsel, external solicitors and medical experts. The costs of DTI staff and of staff working for IRISC, the Department's claim handler, on this work cannot be separately identified.

(b) Significant progress has been made in the last few weeks in negotiating a scheme for compensating ex-miners with Vibration White Finger. I am optimistic

that an agreement will be reached shortly. We began piloting the single medical assessment proc[illegible] at our testing centre in Sheffield on 1 December and [illegible] final agreement is reached, would hope to extend it [illegible]onally by the spring.

(c) As at 1 January some 31,000 claims have been received by IRISC, the Department's claim handlers. We do not know how many further claims may be lodged with claimants' solicitors.

Assisted Areas

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will consult with local authorities on revising UK assisted areas. [65164]

Mr. Wills: During the public consultation period on the review of Assisted Areas, my Department consulted with local authorities, and other key bodies. We are currently considering their responses.

Scientific Research

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proportion of Government expenditure in each EU country has been on scientific research for each year since 1986–87. [64842]

Mr. Battle: Separating out the cost of scientific research from the overall research and development figure is not possible. However, the percentage of central government expenditure used to support research and development in each EU country over the period 1986 to 1996, derived from OECD data, is as follows:

	1986	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Austria	2.22	2.21	2.30	2.38	2.34	2.56	2.58	2.70	2.86	2.77	2.71
Belgium	2.48	2.54	2.55	3.44	3.28	3.23	3.20	3.33	3.25	3.30	3.56
Denmark	2.09	2.14	2.64	2.54	2.46	2.47	2.14	2.08	2.15	2.44	2.42
Finland	2.66	2.70	2.83	2.96	2.99	3.08	3.28	3.69	3.65	3.63	3.51
France	5.84	5.78	5.80	5.92	6.23	5.92	5.37	5.10	4.97	4.69	4.46
Germany	4.56	4.52	4.38	4.58	4.59	4.24	4.08	4.01	3.80	3.76	3.83
Greece	1.12	1.18	1.14	1.44	1.22	1.27	1.14	1.27	1.40	1.91	n/a
Ireland	1.66	1.75	1.76	1.79	1.62	1.64	1.70	1.74	1.57	2.02	n/a
Italy	3.14	3.30	3.54	3.27	3.23	3.30	3.57	3.09	2.93	2.92	n/a
Luxembourg	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Netherlands	4.59	4.85	4.69	4.82	5.17	4.23	4.14	4.06	4.14	4.39	4.31
Portugal	1.32	1.58	1.45	1.54	1.78	1.93	1.93	2.38	n/a	n/a	n/a
Spain	1.54	1.78	1.98	2.28	2.40	2.39	2.29	2.13	2.15	2.29	2.36
Sweden	3.40	3.65	3.70	3.50	3.44	3.60	3.53	3.50	3.38	3.49	n/a
United Kingdom	4.60	4.36	4.13	3.95	3.74	3.53	3.35	3.44	3.18	3.37	3.35

DEFENCE

Military Survey Defence Agency

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Military Survey Defence Agency for 1998–99. [65252]

Mr. Spellar: The role of the Military Survey Defence Agency is to ensure the provision of geographic support to defence operations, planning and training. The Key Targets for the Agency for the 12 months from April 1998 are:

Key Target 1:

To satisfy 100 per cent. of requirement for geographic support to current operations within the timescales agreed between the Agency and its customers.

Key Target 2:

To agree with the Joint Customer Group, by March 1999, a process for measuring the degree of customer satisfaction with the service provided.

Key Target 3:

To complete the agreed annual production programme on time and to cost.

Key Target 4:

To establish by March 1999 a process for measuring the degree of satisfaction the Library service provides.

Key Target 5:

To maintain the readiness state of the required Field Support elements of the Agency as required by the Department.

Key Target 6:

To achieve a 2.5 per cent. improvement in efficiency.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the circumstances in which missiles landed on the Hail Adel residential district of Baghdad during the recent raids on Iraq. [65382]

Mr. George Robertson: No missiles were fired by UK forces in the course of Operation Desert Fox. Questions relating to the circumstances of individual missile attacks are therefore a matter for the US authorities. Throughout Desert Fox the greatest care was taken to avoid any collateral damage and I am confident that any that did occur was limited.

However, the US authorities believe that a US cruise missile may have been shot down on the night of 16–17 December and landed in the Al Karradah area of Baghdad, which is immediately adjacent to the Hail Adel district. They assess that it did not cause any significant damage. The missile was not targeted on a residential area.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Montserrat

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made in concluding the Country Policy Plan for Montserrat. [66004]

Clare Short: The Country Policy Plan (CPP) negotiations took place on Montserrat between 16–20 November between a joint DFID/FCO team and the Government of Montserrat (GoM). My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State has today in Montserrat formally signed the agreement with Chief Minister Brandt.

The CPP sets out (a) GoM's commitment to open and transparent goverment and to key democratic principles and (b) the general principles guiding HMG's relations with its Overseas Territories and specific commitments to Montserrat including the £75m available through DFID's bilateral programme for the period 1998–99 to 2000–01.

The CPP contains a series of policy matrices which set out objectives and timebound actions for each sector. These include both the commitment to implement existing policies and to take decisions on outstanding policy issues. The most important include:

Social Sectors: implementation of a social welfare review to improve the targeting and delivery of support to the neediest, and reivew of the case for restoration of post-secondary and vocational education on the basis of the population on-island;

Public Administration: a job evaluation exercise and review of terms and conditions of service for completion by early 2000 to improve recruitment and retention of staff with marketable skills;

Public Finance: a review of the tax incentive regime in 1999 to ensure an appropriate balance between providing incentives for private sector activity and maintaining an adequate revenue base;

Infrastructure: agreement on provision of a fixed wing airlink facility in 1999;

Productive Sectors: a business opportunity survey to improve the information available to potential investors.

All policy matrices are consistent with the HMG/GoM Sustainable Development Plan (SDP) and with the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) which forms part of the CPP and sets out ongoing and possible new projects for the period 1998–2000.

The draft PSIP is costed at EC$372m (£85m). After deduction of other donor funded projects, the total of projects earmarked for DFID is £82m. This is consistent with the £75m resource envelope as a degree of over-planning is necessary to ensure full use of the resources. The draft PSIP does not yet take account of all of the EDF resources that will become available in 1999 which will be subject to separate negotiations later this year.

A copy of the CPP will be placed in the Libary of the House.

SCOTLAND

New Deal

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people have been found placements under the New Deal scheme in each constituency in Scotland. [63428]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The information is not available for Parliamentary Constituencies; information for units of delivery, based on local enterprise company areas, is set out in the table.

New Deal 18–24: placements made to end September 1998

Thousand

	Total starts[1]	*Unsubsidised jobs*	*Subsidised employment*	*Education and training*	*Voluntary sector*	*Environment task force*
Tayside	2.17	0.25	0.25	0.27	0.09	0.11
Ayrshire	1.69	0.19	0.16	0.11	0.07	0.00
Borders	0.27	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.01
Dumfries and Galloway	0.43	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.02	0.01
Dunbarton	0.82	0.11	0.02	0.06	0.02	0.06
Edinburgh	1.26	0.17	0.10	0.13	0.03	0.01
Fife	1.36	0.15	0.08	0.19	0.02	0.04
Forth Valley	0.90	0.12	0.05	0.09	0.04	0.02
Glasgow	3.18	0.33	0.14	0.32	0.15	0.07
Grampian	0.60	0.07	0.02	0.02	0.00	0.00
Moray	0.19	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.01
Lanarkshire	2.52	0.29	0.14	0.18	0.05	0.05
Renfrewshire	1.10	0.18	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.00
West Lothian	0.42	0.07	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.01
Argyll and Islands	0.21	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01	[2]—
Caithness and Sutherland	0.08	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
Inverness and Nairn	0.17	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.00	[2]—
Lochaber	0.05	0.01	0.01	0.00	[2]—	[2]—
Western Isles	0.09	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	[2]—
Orkney	0.93	0.01	0.00	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Ross and Cromarty	0.14	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00
Shetland	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.00	[2]—	[2]—
Skye and Lochalsh	0.03	0.01	0.01	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Scotland	17.70	2.30	1.21	1.62	0.56	0.40

[1] In addition to those identified as having found placements, the total includes those who are on the Gateway or Follow Through stages and those who have left the programme.

[2] Indicates that there are no young people in the category in question; cells where 0.00 appears indicate that there are between 1 and 4 young people in the category.

Tree Planting

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many trees have been planted in England and Wales on Forestry Commission land in each of the last three years. [64292]

Mr. Macdonald: The subject of the question relates to matters undertaken by Forest Enterprise. I have asked its Chief Executive, Dr. Bob McIntosh, to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Bob McIntosh to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 13 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Scotland has asked me to reply to your Question about the number of trees that have been planted in England and Wales, on Forestry Commission land, in each of the last three years.

We do publish in our Annual Reports this information on an area basis. I have, therefore, set out on the attached sheet the area of land planted, both new planting and restocking, for each of the last 3 years. I have added a column showing the number of trees planted using an appropriate multiplier.

I hope this gives the information you require.

New planting and restocking programmes achieved during the year

	New planting		*Restocking*		*Total*	
	Hectares	*Quantities (Thousand)*	*Hectares*	*Quantities (Thousand)*	*Hectares*	*Quantities (Thousand)*
England						
1995–96						
Conifer	25	80	1,907	6,137	1,932	6,217
Broadleaved	15	8	275	153	290	161
1996–97						
Conifer	4	12	1,989	5,968	1,993	5,980
Broadleaved	0	0	246	158	246	158
1997–98						
Conifer	5	13	2,119	6,670	2,124	6,683
Broadleaved	11	8	206	149	217	157
Wales						
1995–96						
Conifer	0	0	1,519	4,117	1,519	4,117
Broadleaved	0	0	130	265	130	265
1996–97						
Conifer	0	0	2,002	5,509	2,002	5,509
Broadleaved	0	0	148	302	148	302
1997–98						
Conifer	5	10	1,763	5,056	1,768	5,066
Broadleaved	8	2	166	287	174	289

Councillors

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many councillors are *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each local authority in Scotland. [65304]

Mr. McLeish: The information in the table was compiled and supplied by the Scottish Local Government Unit.

	Total number of:			
Council	*All Councillors*	*Male Councillors*	*Women Councillors*	*Women Councillors (percentage)*
Aberdeen City	50	35	15	30.0
Aberdeenshire	47	33	14	29.8
Angus	26	21	5	19.2
Argyll & Bute	33	30	3	9.1
Clackmannanshire	12	10	2	16.7
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	30	27	3	10.0
Dumfries & Galloway	70	62	8	11.4
Dundee City	36	27	9	25.0
East Ayrshire	30	24	6	20.0
East Dunbartonshire	26	20	6	23.1
East Lothian	18	15	3	16.7
East Renfrewshire	20	17	3	15.0
Edinburgh, City of	58	39	19	32.8
Falkirk	36	28	8	22.2
Fife	92	59	33	35.9
Glasgow City	83	58	25	30.1
Highland	72	61	11	15.3
Inverclyde	20	17	3	15.0
Midlothian	15	14	1	6.7
Moray	18	11	7	38.9
North Ayrshire	30	24	6	20.0

Council	Total number of: All Councillors	Male Councillors	Women Councillors	Women Councillors (percentage)
North Lanarkshire	69	64	5	7.2
Orkney Islands	28	21	7	25.0
Perth & Kinross	32	26	6	18.8
Renfrewshire	40	28	12	30.0
Scottish Borders	58	51	7	12.1
Shetland Islands	26	20	6	23.1
South Ayrshire	25	15	10	40.0
South Lanarkshire	74	56	18	24.3
Stirling	22	14	8	35.4
West Dunbartonshire	22	19	3	13.6
West Lothian	27	23	4	14.8
Scotland	1,245	969	276	22.2

Source:
Scottish Local Government Information Unit—July 1998

HEALTH

A and E Wards (London)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement urgently on the condition of accident and emergency wards in London. [64907]

Mr. Denham: We recognise the importance of improving the standard of facilities and equipment in accident and emergency departments. In response to Sir Leslie Turnberg's review, we are taking action to ensure that all Londoners have access to high quality hospital services, with appropriate accident and emergency provision. £30 million from next year's modernisation fund for capital has been earmarked for investment in accident and emergency departments of which £4.367 million has been allocated to London. These resources will be used to provide improved services for patients and a safer working environment for staff. Funds will be allocated across a range of schemes.

Interstitial Cystitis

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people are being treated for interstitial cystitis; what estimate he has made of the cost of their treatment; and what research is currently taking place on this illness. [64562]

Mr. Hutton: The majority of patients with interstitial cystitis are treated in primary care or in outpatients. Information on the numbers of such patients is not collected centrally. A minority of patients require treatment in hospitals and in 1997/98 there were 2,136 admissions in which the primary diagnosis was recorded as interstitial cystitis. The cost of treating these patients cannot be separately identified. There are various studies and reports relating to interstitial cystitis published in the medical journals associated with urology and gynaecology, and a range of surgical and non-surgical treatments available or on trial. The Department is not currently funding any specific research in this area.

Pensions

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will backdate the pension arrangements for widowers of female doctors to align them with the pension arrangements for widows of male doctors. [65114]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Pension Scheme provides equal survivor benefits for legal spouses on service from 6 April 1988. A scheme was available until June 1989 which allowed female members to purchase widowers' cover for earlier service, the costs being shared with NHS employers. The capitalised cost of backdating widowers' cover, updated to take account of pay rises, is now estimated to be in the order of £500 million. These costs would have to be paid in full by the whole membership and there is no indication that they would be willing to do so.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been spent to date on legal, financial and other consultancy costs for the public/private partnership for London Underground. [64573]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Transport employs a number of firms to provide advice on implementing the PPP, jointly to LT and the Government. this innovative arrangement ensures that LT and the Government receive the best advice, while minimising the overall cost of implementing the PPP.

I understand from London Transport that their expenditure on external consultants, from 20 March 1998 (the date of the Government's announcement) to 2 January 1999, for work on the PPP and restructuring London Underground was £9.85 million. For reasons of commercial confidentiality, it is not possible to give figures for the costs of employing individual firms. For the future, I intend to publish updated figures at the end of the financial year and, therefore, at six-monthly intervals.

Drivers' Licences

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of (i) men and (ii) women resident in Britain (1) in total and (2) between the ages of *(a)* 17 and 34 and *(b)* 35 and 60 years hold a current UK driver's licence. [64764]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The number of male and female full licence holders in Great Britain in total and by age band, as at October 1998 is as follows:

Million

	Male	*Female*
Total 16 and over	18.714	13.903
17–34	5.402	4.610
35–60	9.387	7.260

The latest estimates available for the Great Britain resident population (Office for National Statistics) relate to 1997, and a comparison of the total full licence holder figures for 1997 with these population figures for those aged 16 and over gives the following results:

	Male	*Female*
Licence holders (million)	18.657	13.672
Resident population (million)	22.171	23.468
Percentage licence holders	84.2	58.3

Due to inconsistencies in the data there are difficulties in providing a break-down of these overall percentages by age group. My noble Friend the Minister for Roads and Road Safety will write to the hon. Member with further details.

Local Authority Housing Authorities

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list all local authority housing authorities specifying in respect of each whether the chair is a man or a woman. [65318]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not held centrally.

Leylandii Trees

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will report on the progress of the Government's review of the legislation surrounding problems caused by leylandii trees; and when an announcement is expected to be made. [65277]

Mr. Meale: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply to the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *473*.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide a breakdown of the changes to the criteria for calculating the Social Services SSA block in the local government settlements for 1999–2000. [65035]

Ms Armstrong: The changes proposed to the method of calculating standard spending assessments for 1999–2000 are:

(i) Changing the formula for children's social services on the basis of research carried out by the University of York, and including an allowance for the higher costs of foster care in some areas;

(ii) Changing the formula for elderly residential social services to: include claimants of disability living allowance; update gross costs and income from charges to allow for the effects of community care; and change the measure of elderly population to exclude people living in institutions rather than in private households; and

(iii) Changing the formula for elderly domiciliary social services to include an allowance for sparsity of population to distribute 0.5 per cent. of the total of this element of the SSA; and to adjust the cost allowance of each elderly domiciliary client to take account of each authority's potential to raise income from charges.

National Air Quality Strategy

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the outcome of the Review of the UK National Air Quality Strategy. [65561]

Mr. Prescott: I am pleased to announce today our proposals to amend the UK National Air Quality Strategy. Cleaning up the air that we breathe and delivering on the right to clean air is one of the top priorities of this Government. There is still some way to go to protect our health and the environment from the effects of air pollution. The proposals that I am announcing today deliver on our pre-election commitment to the right to clean air. But improving air quality is not just for Government, or industry, we all have a responsibility to do our bit to improve the quality of our air.

The National Air Quality Strategy was first published in March 1997 fulfilling the requirement under the Environment Act 1995 for a national air quality strategy setting out policies for the management of ambient air quality. The Government endorsed this Strategy in July 1997, but announced that it would be reviewed at the earliest opportunity in order to look at the prospects for delivering cleaner air more quickly. The Government accordingly brought forward to the end of 1998 the previously announced review, and as a result we have been able to make rapid progress on delivering our commitment to the right to clean air.

The Strategy sets health-based objectives for 2005 for the eight air pollutants which have the greatest impact on health. Our aim in the review was to look at the prospects for meeting the objectives sooner or introducing tougher objectives where feasible and justified. This has been a thorough and wide-ranging review, during which we considered the legal framework, the scientific, economic and technical basis for decision-making on air quality policy, and the case for changes to the scope and content of the Strategy. My Department has worked closely with the Scottish Office, Welsh Office and Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland and we have consulted widely with stakeholders in producing our proposals.

We have now completed the review and propose to tighten the objectives for five pollutants; for benzene, 1,3-butadiene and carbon monoxide we propose to bring forward the date for achieving the objectives; for lead we propose to bring forward the date for achieving the existing objective and to introduce a new tougher objective based on the most recent health advice; for nitrogen dioxide we propose to introduce a tougher hourly objective, while retaining the current annual objective. Action is in progress at EU level on ozone and we have concluded that it makes sense to await the outcome of that before deciding how to move forward on this pollutant. On particles (PM^{10}) the work of the Airborne Particles Expert Group has shown that exceedences of our national

objective are strongly influenced by sources from mainland Europe. This is not a problem that the UK can solve alone. We intend to discuss with our European partners how best this issue can be taken forward at the European level. In addition, it is not yet clear whether PM^{10} or a smaller fraction of particles poses the greater threat to health. We have concluded that in the short term to incorporate the proposed EU vales for PM^{10} will provide adequate protection as an interim step towards achieving the existing objective. We will look at this objective again, as well as those for nitrogen dioxide, when we undertake a further review of the Strategy in two years time. On sulphur dioxide, we propose to retain the existing objective, supplemented by the proposed EU limit values. We are also proposing to extend the Strategy to include objectives for the protection of vegetation and ecosystems. The changes we propose will also ensure that we deliver the limit values contained in the proposed first Air Quality Daughter Directive.

We will now consult widely on our proposals. We will produce a revised Strategy later this year, which will itself be subject to consultation before being finalised by the end of the year. This is the first in a rolling programme of reviews of the Strategy, to keep it up to date with technological and scientific advances, improved modelling techniques, an increasingly better understanding of the economic and social issues involved and to reflect developments in European legislation. We intend that the next review of the Strategy should start once this one is complete and further information is available on costs and benefits, the health effects of air pollution and the impact that policy measures will have on improving air quality.

We all have a responsibility to do our bit to improve the quality of the air that we breathe and the environment that we live in. The proposals that we have announced today set in place the framework to take this forward. I have placed copies of our consultation document in the Libraries of the House and the Vote Office.

Sporting Facilities

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in his revision of the current Planning Guidance Note for Sport and Recreation (PPG17). [65431]

Mr. Raynsford: In September last year, the Department published a research report entitled *The Effectiveness of Planning Policy Guidance on Sport and Recreation* which made recommendations about possible revisions that might be made to PPG 17. A number of regional seminars have sequently been held to take views on the recommendations set out in the report. A draft revised PPG will be issued for consultation later this year.

Environmental Policy

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out his responsibilities in respect of the co-ordination of Government policy on environmental issues. [63731]

Mr. Meale: Under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has policy responsibilities for sustainable development and the environment, including for 'greening' Government. The Deputy Prime Minister chairs the Cabinet Committee on the Environment (ENV) which considers environmental policies and co-ordinates those on sustainable development. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment chairs regular meetings of the Green Ministers Committee, and provides reports on the work of that Committee to the Chairman of ENV. Green Ministers are reponsible for ensuring that the right systems are in place in their Departments to support the integration of environmental considerations into policy making and operations.

Correspondence

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells dated 29 September, about the A21 in Kent; [65435]

(2) when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells dated 7 September, about the A21 in Kent; [65436]

(3) when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells dated 26 November, about the A21 in Kent. [65437]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My noble Friend the Minister for Roads and Road Safety replied on Tuesday 12 January 1999.

Air Traffic (Stansted)

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to consult on BAA plc's application to raise the Passenger Air Transport Movement limit at Stansted Airport. [65756]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am publishing today a consultation paper on the application by BAA for an increase in the ceiling on passenger air transport movements (the number of passenger aircraft take-offs and landings) at Stansted Airport. BAA are seeking an increase from 120,000 movements a year to 185,000.

Stansted is the only UK airport to have a PATM limit set by the Government, and has had one since 1987. The purpose is to allow expansion of the airport to be phased so that the necessary supporting infrastructure can keep pace with the expansion, and for an appropriate balance to be struck between local and aviation interests.

Copies are being placed in the Libraries of the House and are available from the Department. The closing date for responses to the consultation is 12 March 1999.

Rent Increases

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *638–39*, what progress he has made in making an Order under section 31 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 to limit exceptionally high fair rent increases. [65870]

Mr. Raynsford: The Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999 (SI 1999/No. 6) was laid before Parliament on Monday 11 January 1999 and will come into force on

Monday 1 February 1999. My Department will be issuing an explanatory leaflet about the new limits later this month. Details will also appear on our internet site.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the proportion of those whose earnings will move *(a)* below and *(b)* above the £9,000 threshold to stakeholder pension during the first decade of the scheme's life. [65173]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is not available.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list those people who suggested abolition of the current pension system referred to in paragraph 36 of the summary of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions". [64849]

Mr. Timms: Of the more than 2,000 submissions to the Pensions Review, a small number suggested abolition of the current pension system referred to in paragraph 36 of the summary of the Green Paper, "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions".

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to link the £9,000 entrance into stakeholder pensions to *(a)* earnings and *(b)* prices. [65174]

Mr. Timms: As explained in the Green Paper on pensions "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" the new thresholds of £9,000 and £18,500 for State Second Pension will be uprated in line with average earnings.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish the data supporting the statement in paragraph 7 of the third chapter of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" that over a whole working life more people are experiencing periods on both lower and higher income. [64943]

Mr. Timms: The increased likelihood of income fluctuations is due to the changes in the labour market and modern society discussed in paragraph 7 of the third chapter of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions". Increases in the numbers of self-employed, part-time and temporary workers mean that people's incomes from earnings are more likely to be unevenly distributed over time, making it more difficult for people to build up pension rights.

The distribution of income has also widened considerably since 1979. This is partly due to an increase in the number of people living in workless households. This trend could reflect increased fluctuations in people's incomes if it is the result of people experiencing more periods of worklessness over the life cycle.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to be able to bring forward proposals to assist those workers earning below the lower earnings level who are not covered by the reforms in "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions". [64935]

Mr. Timms: Our objectives are to provide security for those who cannot provide for themselves and to make it easier for people who can save, to do so. Currently there are many people who cannot provide for themselves in retirement because they are outside the labour market or because their earnings are low as a consequence of the number of hours they work or their hourly rates of pay. The introduction of the national minimum wage will ensure that those working substantial numbers of hours are paid at levels which mean they are able to build up entitlement to a basic pension.

We recognise that there remains a group of people, mainly women, who are active in the labour market but whose access to contributory pensions is affected by the fact that they work part-time on low earnings for long periods. As signalled in the Green Paper "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions", we will be considering whether more needs to be done to assist this group within the National Insurance scheme. Those pensioners who are not able to build up an adequate pension during their working lifetime will be able to receive the minimum income guarantee.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of private pensions which give poor value. [64941]

Mr. Timms: The Green Paper "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" indicates that some types of personal pensions can be unsuitable for people who have low or intermittent earnings, or who cannot maintain the regular contributions required. It is not possible to quantify the number of pensions which provide poor value, since this depends both on the terms of individual arrangements and on the subsequent circumstances of those who take them out. This is why we have brought forward proposals for new stakeholder pension schemes.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will estimate how many *(a)* carers and *(b)* people with disabilities will (i) no longer be and (ii) remain dependent on means-tested benefits in retirement once the proposals in "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" are fully operative; [64818]

(2) what will be, in each of the next five decades, the proportion of *(a)* pension payments, *(b)* national insurance rebates and *(c)* tax benefits going to each decile group of the population (i) under the current arrangement and (ii) as a result of the reforms advocated in "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions". [64942]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is not available.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of pensioners retiring in each of the next five decades will be *(a)* totally dependent on means-tested benefits and *(b)* dependent upon means-tested benefits for part of their pensioner lives, if the proposals in "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" are not enacted. [64977]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is not available.

Projections forward to the year 2050 are subject to a high degree of uncertainty, given the number of assumptions that need to be made in making these estimates. Some of those who will be pensioners in 2050 have yet to begin work, and most are today in their 20s and 30s.

Estimates of the number of pensioners receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee have been made by extrapolating estimates from the PENSIM model, but these can only give a broad indication of the likely order of magnitude of figures so far into the future. The PENSIM projections can only be applied to estimates of pensioners on the Minimum Income Guarantee at a particular point in time.

Estimates suggest that approximately 1.5 million pensioners (around 1 in 5, or 20 per cent.) will receive payments from the Minimum Income Guarantee when it is introduced in April 1999. On the basis of unchanged policies, estimates suggest that approximately 3.5 million pensioners (1 in 3) in 2050 could rely on the Minimum Income Guarantee. Even if no behaviour changes are assumed, the new insurance contract for pensions will mean that these estimates are reduced to approximately 2.5 million pensioners (1 in 4) receiving income from the Minimum Income Guarantee in 2050, and a lower proportion in years after 2050.

Estimates for other income related benefits (such as Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit), or of changes in the circumstances of individuals over time, are not available, as these projections would require many more assumptions to be made and would be surrounded by an unacceptable level of uncertainty.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number and percentage of pensioners eligible for the Government's new income guarantee for all pensioners *(a)* at the inception of the scheme and *(b)* at 10 yearly intervals for the following five decades. [64939]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the form requested.

The proposals in the Government's Green Paper "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnerships in Pensions" are designed to ensure that someone with a full working life, or years covered by credits, will receive a pension on retirement above the Minimum Income Guarantee. The impact of the new State Second pension in 2050, once individuals have experienced a full working lifetime under the new scheme is shown in the table accompanying paragraph 14 of chapter 6 of the Green Paper.

The precise impact of the proposals will, therefore, depend on a variety of factors, including employment records and additional voluntary savings. The proposals in "Partnership in Pensions" will promote behavioural changes through the spread of good value funded second pensions, improved pensions education, and the greater reward in retirement form moving from benefits to work.

Projections forward to the year 2050 are subject to a high degree of uncertainty, given the number of assumptions that need to be made in making these estimates. Some of those who will be pensioners in 2050 have yet to begin work, and most are today in their 20s and 30s.

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As an illustration of the possible impact of the behavioural effects of the proposals in "Partnership in Pensions", if all those in work saved an additional 5 per cent., the figure would fall to approximately 2 million in 2050.

Notes:

1. Pensioners are defined as pensioner benefit units at and above State pension age.

2. The figures and proportions given for the Minimum Income Guarantee are of pensioner benefit units (at least one of State pension age or above), rather than individual pensioners.

Contributions Agency

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much is being spent on the new computer system at the Central Office of the Contributions Agency in Newcastle; and when it *(a)* was originally and *(b)* is currently expected to be fully operational. [64853]

Mr. Timms: If Andersen Consulting were to process anticipated volumes of the new National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2) the budget for the financial year to 1 April 1999 is expected to be £5.301 million. The

base annual service charge for NIRS2 over the next three years is budgeted at £6.850 million per annum. This amount is subject to volumes of work processed and also any charges for agreed enhancements to the system.

The original contract allowed for the delivery of the system over 3 releases between February 1997 and April 1999. A subsequent Deed of Amendment was agreed in July 1996, which allowed for a phased delivery of the first release. NIRS2 Release 1 is expected to be fully operational by April 1999.

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what instructions have been given to the Benefits Agency and other related agencies to expedite claims for benefits from victims of Gulf War Syndrome. [64998]

Mr. Timms: Extensive international research has not identified a specific Gulf-related illness.

Claims by Gulf war veterans in respect of Social Security benefits are dealt with by the Benefits Agency in the same way as all other claims.

The War Pensions Agency endeavours to action all claims for war pension (which may be made in respect of any condition believed to be due to any service in the armed forces) as expeditiously as possible. Claims for war pension in respect of Gulf-related illnesses are dealt with by a dedicated section within the War Pensions Agency. A high proportion of Gulf claims are for a number of ill-defined conditions and consideration of these requires extensive medical and other evidence before claims can be determined.

In order to expedite awards, partial decisions are made as an interim measure whilst other inquiries continue, and, where despite these inquiries the diagnosis remains unclear, the World Health Organisation international classification of diseases (ICD 10) "symptoms, signs and ill-defined conditions" is used. Also, medical evidence from any previous attendance at the Ministry of Defence Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme is used whenever possible as this may reduce the requirement to seek further evidence.

Occupational Pension Schemes

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many, and what proportion of, employers submitting evidence to the Pension Review called for the right to make the membership of occupational pension schemes compulsory. [64937]

Mr. Timms: It is not possible to identify how many of the respondents to the Pensions Review were employers. Of the more than 2,000 submissions to the Pensions Review, 310 commented on compulsion and a small number proposed that membership of occupational schemes should be compulsory. As part of the consultation arising from the Green Paper on Pensions "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" the Government are seeking views on whether employers should be allowed to require employees to be members of their occupational schemes, subject to a right for employees to opt out in certain circumstances.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish the consultation paper on occupational pension changes. [64820]

Mr. Timms: The consultation document, "Strengthening the Pensions Framework", was published on 16 December 1998. Copies were placed in the Library.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the grounds were for his decision not to make membership of occupational pension schemes compulsory for relevant employers. [64936]

Mr. Timms: While we recognise that most employees benefit from membership of occupational schemes, not all employees do so.

We are therefore seeking views on whether we should allow employers to require employees to be members of their occupational schemes, subject to a right for employees to opt-out. We are also seeking views on the conditions which should be satisfied before an opt-out is permitted.

Income Support

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* by constituency and *(b)* by county the number of pensioners that have not taken up their income support entitlement in Wales in the last year for which figures are available. [64657]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the proportion of pensioners who will be dependent on income support in 2050 *(a)* on present policies and *(b)* under his proposed pensions policies. [64707]

Mr. Timms: The proposals in the Government's Green Paper "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" are designed to ensure that someone with a full working life, or years covered by credits, will receive a pension on retirement above the minimum income guarantee. The impact of the new State Second pension in 2050, once individuals have experienced a full working lifetime under the new scheme is shown in the table accompanying paragraph 14 of chapter 6 of the Green Paper.

The precise impact of the proposals will, therefore, depend on a variety of factors, including employment records and additional voluntary savings. The proposals in "Partnership in Pensions" will promote behavioural changes through the spread of good value funded second pensions, improved pensions education, and the greater reward in retirement form moving from benefits to work.

Projections forward to the year 2050 are subject to a high degree of uncertainty, given the number of assumptions that need to be made in making these estimates. Some of those who will be pensioners in 2050 have yet to begin work, and most are today in their 20s and 30s.

Estimates have been made by extrapolating projections from the PENSIM model, but these can only give a broad indication of the likely order of magnitude of figures so far into the future.

On the basis of unchanged policies, estimates suggest that approximately 1 in 3 pensioners in 2050 could rely on Income Support. Even if no behavioural changes are assumed, the new insurance contract for pensions will mean that these estimates are reduced to approximately 1 in 4 pensioners receiving income from the Minimum Income Guarantee in 2050, and a lower proportion in years after 2050.

As an illustration of the possible impact of the behavioural effects of the proposals in "Partnership in Pensions", if all those in work saved an additional 5 per cent., the figure would fall to approximately 1 in 5 in 2050.

Children (Household Profile)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate *(a)* how many children are living in households which have below half average income and *(b)* how many children live in households headed by (i) a married couple, (ii) a cohabiting couple and (iii) a lone parent; and if he will break down the figures between (A) two working parents, (B) one working parent and (C) no working parent families. [64673]

Angela Eagle *[pursuant to her reply, 17 December 1998, c. 718]:* The information is in the tables.

The estimated total numbers of children living in households below half average income for the financial year 1996–97 in Great Britain

	Number of children (Million)
Before housing costs (BHC) measure of income	3.3
After housing costs (AHC) measure of income	4.5

Number of children living in households with below half average income by family type and economic status of parents, 1996–97

Million

	Before housing costs (BHC)			*After housing costs (AHC)*		
	Couples			*Couples*		
	Married	*Co-habiting*	*Lone parents*	*Married*	*Co-habiting*	*Lone parents*
2 working parents	0.3	[1]—	0.0	0.4	[1]—	0.0
1 working parent	0.8	[1]—	0.2	1.0	[1]—	0.3
0 working parents	0.7	[1]—	1.0	0.8	[1]—	1.6
Total	1.8	0.3	1.2	2.2	0.4	1.9

[1] The figures for co-habiting couples are not shown because their respective sample sizes are too small to provide robust figures at the required level of detail. However, approximately half of the children belonging to all such couples live in households with at least one working parent.

Source:

All figures are estimates taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data set based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS).

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

New Forest Fox Hounds

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what authority the Parliamentary Secretary instructed Forest Enterprise to issue a formal warning to the New Forest Fox Hounds on 6 November. [65007]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* Forest Enterprise issued this warning to the New Forest Fox Hounds as a result of a breach of the conditions of their licence. Forest Enterprise will take appropriate action, which may include suspension of the licence, if there are further breaches of the licence conditions. The New Forest Fox Hounds have accepted this. The licence is enforced by Forest Enterprise and I have not at any time instructed Forest Enterprise, or the Forestry Commissioners, to issue a formal warning to the New Forest Fox Hounds. I expect Forest Enterprise to enforce all conditions and they have my full support in doing so.

Basking Sharks

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has to increase protection for the basking shark through the Common Fisheries Policy; and if he will make a statement. [65272]

Mr. Morley: Following pressure from the United Kingdom, new EC fisheries technical conservation rules coming into force on 1 January 2000 will ban the sale or offering for sale of marine species such as basking sharks caught using a harpoon or other projectile. From the same date, EC fishermen will be required to make logbook entries for all species caught in excess of 50kg. This should allow for the accurate monitoring of any accidental bycatches of basking sharks.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Government of Qatar about the raid on Iraq. [65376]

Mr. Fatchett: We have kept in regular contact with the Qatari Government on Iraq. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister sent a message to the Amir about the outcome of military action. I telephoned the Qatari Foreign Minister at the start of Operation Desert Fox. Her Majesty's Ambassador in Doha made several calls on the Qatari Foreign Minister and wrote to the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Chief of Staff and other senior figures on the effectiveness of military action.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the countries from which Her Majesty's Government have received letters or messages of protest concerning the bombing of Iraq. [65280]

Mr. Fatchett: Operation Desert Fox gathered considerable international support and understanding. Some have criticised our action. Messages and letters received by HMG reflect a wide spectrum of views.

Visas (Students)

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many prospective students on FCO scholarships or sponsorships were denied visas to visit the UK in the most recent year for which figures are available. [65278]

Mr. Fatchett: These figures are not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Terence Arthur Indge

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received about the case of Terence Arthur Indge concerning a road traffic accident in Abu Dhabi in 1991; and if he will make a statement. [65162]

Mr. Fatchett: Since 1991, this Department has received representations from Mrs. Indge about her husband's case, and from the right hon. and learned Member.

Faroe Islands

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of the Faroe Islands over its whaling policy; and if he will make a statement. [64838]

Mr. Fatchett: Denmark is responsible for the whaling policy of the Faroe Islands. While I have made no representations to Denmark, we have made plain the widespread public concern about the humane treatment of all cetaceans. We will ensure that this issue is addressed at the next meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to be held in Grenada in May.

Edgar Fernandes

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date the British Ambassador to Turkey wrote to the Maltese Government in respect of the extradition proceedings relating to the murder of Edgar Fernandes. [65105]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Ambassador in Ankara has not written to the Maltese Government in respect of the case of Edgar Fernandes. As my previous answers on 29 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *271* and 10 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *281* show, our staff in Valletta are in regular contact with the Maltese Government in respect of the extradition proceedings.

My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State last raised the matter with the Turkish Ambassador to London on 7 January.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government have taken to ensure that the Maltese Government are acting expeditiously in respect of extradition proceedings relating to the murder of Edgar Fernandes. [65106]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friend to my answers of 29 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *271* and 10 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *281*. Our staff in Valletta continue to take every opportunity to remind the Maltese Government of our interest in the extradition of Mr. Mohammed Abdal Monem Abbas Aly. The Vice-Consul in Valletta regularly speaks to the Police and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He last called on the Maltese Assistant Attorney General to discuss the case on 7 January.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions there have been and on what date between the British Ambassador to Malta and the Maltese Government on extradition proceedings relating to the murder of Edgar Fernandes. [65159]

Mr. Fatchett: The British High Commissioner in Valletta formally discussed the extradition proceedings with the Attorney General and the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 7 October 1998. He has since seen members of the Maltese Government on many occasions and consistently takes the opportunity of reminding them of our interests in the extradition of Mr. Mohammed Abdal Monem Abbas Aly to Turkey.

CABINET OFFICE

Annual Report

12. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will publish in the Government's annual report for 1998–99 an independent assessment of the progress of the Government in meeting each of the 1997 manifesto commitments. [63730]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The 1998 Annual Report of the Government included independent comments from members of the public on the Government's performance, though not on each and every one of the 177 manifesto commitments. Instead, all the commitments were subject

to a full, factual assessment, prepared by civil servants. We expect that the 1999 Annual Report will be prepared in the same way.

Better Government Initiative

15. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when he expects to publish the better government White Paper. [63734]

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what further measures are planned to advance the better government agenda. [63733]

Mr. Kilfoyle: As my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office explained to the House on 21 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1267–68, the Government will publish a White Paper in the Spring, setting out their programme for modernising government and joining-up public services to respond better to the people who need them. We are keen to take account of as wide a range of views and ideas as possible in preparing the White Paper. That is why he recently launched a Modernising Government discussion forum on the Downing Street web-site, to allow more people to give us their views on the Government's vision for our public services. The Invest to Save Budget, which provides funding for public sector bodies to implement joint working and better co-ordination of service delivery, is another example of the Government's commitment to the Modernising Government programme.

Duchy of Lancaster

16. **Mr. Stott:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on his duties in relation to the Duchy of Lancaster. [63735]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: As Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, I administer the Duchy on behalf of Her Majesty The Queen. My responsibilities include the administration of the Duchy's estates, finances, the appointment of magistrates in the Duchy area, appointments to Church Livings and several appointments in connection with the Duchy's historic duties.

Media Contact

17. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how frequently he meets the media to discuss aspects of the Government's business. [63736]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The role of the Minister for the Cabinet Office requires that the Government message is communicated at every opportunity. This means that I frequently accept broadcast interview requests from national and regional media outlets on a wide range of subjects connected with Government business.

I also brief media either individually by means of interviews or articles for publication and when appropriate hold press conferences to make announcements directly connected to the work of the Cabinet Office.

Anti-drugs Strategy

18. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [63737]

20. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [63739]

22. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the progress being made in implementing the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [63741]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I refer my hon. Friends to my answer earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), *Official Report, columns 289.*

Public Information Campaigns

19. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement about the Government's policy regarding the use of public money for public information campaigns. [63738]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Government has a duty to inform both Parliament and the public about its policies, decisions and actions, in accordance with the long-standing conventions followed by successive administrations. The conventions require that Government information activities "should be conducted in an economic and appropriate way, having regard to the need to be able to justify the costs as expenditure of public funds".

Invest to Save Programme

21. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the Invest to Save programme. [63740]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: This morning my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I announced £120 million of new funding for 33 projects promoting greater responsiveness and efficiency in the delivery of public services. This funding is being provided from the Invest to Save Budget which was set up by the Treasury following the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The projects we announced today are practical examples of what we mean by modernising public services. They demonstrate how our drive for innovative, joined-up and locally responsive government will make life easier for people using public services.

Policy Co-ordination

23. **Mr. Ivan Lewis:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on progress in improving the mechanisms for co-ordination between Government Departments. [63743]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Good progress is being made. The following initiatives are helping to improve co-ordination between Government Departments:

- the role of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office is to advise and assist ministerial colleagues in the effective co-ordination and presentation of Government policy;
- the restructured and strengthened Cabinet Office is helping to bring Departments together to formulate policy collectively and to drive forward cross-Departmental issues; and
- a number of cross-cutting Units have been established to tackle some of the difficult issues which cross conventional Departmental boundaries.

We plan to publish a White Paper in the Spring setting out our programme for modernising government and joining up public services to respond better to the people who need them.

Duchy of Lancaster (Assets)

24. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what investment the Duchy of Lancaster has made in its land and other assets in the last 12 months. [63744]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Duchy of Lancaster has, in the twelve month period to the 30 September 1998, invested £185,600 in improvements to its properties and has acquired property to the value of £3,265,600. In addition, the Duchy has allocated £2,410,500 for the purchase of portfolio investments. The total investment made has therefore been £5,861,700.

Duchy of Lancaster (Magistrates)

25. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the appointment of magistrates in the Duchy of Lancaster. [63746]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I appoint magistrates in Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside in accordance with the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. I am assisted in this task by a number of Advisory Committees and Sub-Committees who are responsible for recruiting, interviewing and recommending suitable people to me for appointment as magistrates. Committees work to a set of Directions similar to those used by the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committees in the remainder of England and Wales.

Information Warfare

26. **Mrs. Lait:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress is being made in developing a dialogue with relevant private sector organisations on the issues of defensive information warfare. [63747]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Government attach great importance to the protection of key IT systems in Government and the private sector. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence indicated in the information warfare Adjournment Debate on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 987–92, the Government hope to announce shortly new initiatives to enhance the defence of the critical national infrastructure from the risk, of a disabling electronic attack. A well-established partnership already exists with key private sector players as part of the long-standing arrangements for protection against threats such as terrorism and this provides a strong foundation for further development of dialogue and appropriate protective measures, to defend against information Warfare.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 14 January 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Planning Applications

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many planning applications have been submitted in the past year for major developments with particular reference to shopping complexes in the Newtownbreda Purdysburn and Saintfield Road area of South Belfast. [65108]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Rev. Martin Smyth, dated 14 January 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent question about planning applications for major developments with particular reference to shopping complexes in the Newtownbreda, Purdysburn and Saintfield Road areas of South Belfast.

During the period January—December 1998, the Planning Service received two such major applications. One is for the development of a Class 1 foodstore and petrol filling station on lands at 170 Newtownbreda Road, Newtownbreda. The other is for a site for a retail unit, petrol filling station and park and ride facility at the junction of new Link Road, adjacent to Beechhill Road and Saintfield Road, Castlereagh. Both applications have been designated under the Article 31 procedures of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 and are at an early consideration stage. Retail and Traffic Impact Assessments have been received on both applications. No decision has yet been made on the need for a Public Inquiry to be held.

You will be interested to know that the Planning Service is also considering a Crown Development submission from the Roads Service for a park and ride scheme to include car park, terminal building and small scale retail at Saintfield Road, Purdysburn Road, Castlereagh.

I do hope this is helpful.

Conspiracy

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons have been *(a)* arrested, *(b)* charged and *(c)* convicted of conspiracy in the UK to commit offences abroad. [64207]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is not available, as the police and Court databases do not currently record arrests, charges or convictions against the heading "conspiracy in the UK to commit offences abroad".

Local Government Finance

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to provide data on Northern Ireland Government and local authority accounts consistent with the National Accounting Convention. [63972]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* Government departments in Northern Ireland produce annual accounts in accordance with guidance issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel—this guidance is based on that issued by HM Treasury to GB departments. Similarly, Northern Ireland district councils produce accounts which are broadly in line with those produced by local authorities in Great Britain

SCOTLAND

Scottish Enterprise

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the Chairman of Scottish Enterprise to discuss strategy. [66005]

Mr. Dewar: My noble Friend Lord Macdonald, the Minister with responsibility for business and industry, last met Sir Ian Wood, Chairman of Scottish Enterprise, to discuss the Scottish Enterprise strategy on 4 December 1998. At my request Scottish Enterprise has been reviewing its strategy over the last year. This process has involved extensive public consultation. The new strategy will be launched today. I have placed copies in the House of Commons Library.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63915]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* Expenditure on public opinion research undertaken by my Department since May 1997 was £43,000. Expenditure on information campaigns totalled £2,439,000 of which £1,130,000 was spent on television, £598,000 on radio and £711,000 on Press. Direct mail amounted to £22,000.

Hospital Treatment (Island Residents)

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what financial support is available to Scottish island residents travelling to mainland hospitals for specialist treatment and advice. [65275]

Mr. Galbraith: The Highlands and Islands Patients Travelling Expenses Scheme provides for the reimbursement of travelling expenses in excess of a contribution, currently £8.00, for patients attending hospital, where the distance travelled from the patient's home (or place of residence) to the hospital is 30 miles or more, or involves a journey by sea of more than 5 miles.

Salmon Fisheries

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to receive the report of the Task Force appointed to review the arrangements surrounding protection orders issued under the Freshwater and Salmon Fisheries (Scotland) Act 1976; and if he will make a statement. [66316]

Mr. Macdonald: Copies of the report have been placed in the Library. It will also be available on the Scottish Office website.

I am grateful to the Task Force for their deliberations. They have made a number of recommendations for improving the transparency of the application process and for enhancing the operation and monitoring of Protection Orders approved. These recommendations have been incorporated in the revised guidance and application forms.

Dounreay

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the timescale for the clean-up of the area within two kilometres of the outfall pipe of UKAEA Dounreay; what action has been taken by UKAEA to identify the source of the escaped irradiated nuclear fuel fragments; what action has been taken by UKAEA to clear Sandside beach of all such fragments; when the fishing restriction in this area will next be reviewed by SEPA; what is the nature of SEPA's monitoring of the specified area; what monitoring is carried out on the land and sea adjacent to the specified area; and what scientific advice he has been given, and from whom, regarding the risk to humans on Sandside beach from direct contact with radioactive particles from UKAEA Dounreay. [65051]

Mr. Macdonald: The timescale for clean-up operations can only be considered when survey work has been completed and properly assessed.

The United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) has undertaken a substantial programme of work to determine the source and extent of particles on the seabed adjacent to the Dounreay site. The study takes advantage of state-of-the-art diving and other monitoring technology. The results of this study are expected to be published shortly. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will then consider possible courses of action.

Since 1983 three particles have been found in Sandside Bay and removed. UKAEA currently monitors the strandline at Sandside Bay weekly, and nearby public beaches twice yearly or following storm activity. UKAEA undertakes such remedial action as is necessary in line with the requirements of the regulators to ensure public safety.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) will review the fishing restrictions when more complete information is available on the contamination of the seabed and local marine environment or if new information relating to offshore contamination comes to light.

SEPA undertakes monitoring of seafood (collected on a quarterly basis) from within the restricted area and the results are provided to the Scottish Office as well as being published annually. No fragments of irradiated nuclear fuel have been detected in the samples taken from the area.

UKAEA also carries out monitoring of seafood from within the restricted area and further afield. In addition to monitoring nearby public beaches, UKAEA currently monitors the foreshore at Dounreay fortnightly.

The National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) supplied scientific advice on the risks to human health from encountering fragments of irradiated nuclear fuel. That advice was contained in the report "Fragments of Irradiated Nuclear Fuel in the Dounreay Local Environment" submitted by SEPA to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, a copy of which was placed in the House of Commons Library following a parliamentary question answered on 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 418, number 64389. The report includes an assessment of the risk to Sandside Bay bait collectors, the group likely to spend more time in contact with the sediment than most other users. NRPB considered the probability of the bait collectors encountering a fuel fragment to be a round 1 in 200,000. The views of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation int he Environment (COMARE) were taken into account by the NRPB.

Organic Aid Scheme

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what resources he is providing for the Organic Aid Scheme in Scotland in the current financial year. [65647]

Mr. Macdonald: I expect expenditure on the Organic Aid Scheme in Scotland to be about £0.24m in 1998–99. This will represent a rise of 64 per cent. over expenditure in 1997–98.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will ensure that, in making arrangements for dealing with asylum seekers, his Department holds discussions with organisations expert in the provision of *(a)* social welfare, *(b)* housing and *(c)* legal advice to (i) Vietnamese boat people and (ii) Bosnian refugees. [65254]

Mr. Dewar: The new arrangements for dealing with asylum seekers will apply to the United Kingdom so that they are treated equally across to whole country. Responsibility for these matters rests with the Home Office which is consulting extensively about the arrangements for the future, including with those organisations expert in the areas mentioned.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if, in the implementation of the proposals in the Asylum Seekers White Paper, he will ensure the retention of the partnership arrangements between the Scottish Office, COSLA and local authorities for supporting asylum-seekers while their applications are being considered. [65116]

Mr. Dewar: The new asylum support system proposed in the White Paper will be administered by an Asylum Support Directorate in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in the Home Office. My Department and the Home Office are currently considering what arrangements should apply when the asylum seekers are placed in Scotland.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Home Office regarding the proposals in the White Paper on Asylum Seekers to disperse asylum seekers outside London. [65117]

Mr. Dewar: I was fully involved in collective consideration of the White Paper, as were other ministerial colleagues. My officials are in regular contact

with officials in the Home Office as the details of the support scheme—including arrangements for dispersal of asylum seekers—are developed.

Agricultural Business Improvement Scheme

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to issue revised details and guidelines in respect of the Agricultural Business Improvement Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [65644]

Mr. Macdonald: An announcement will be made in March about a range of improvements being introduced to the Objective 1 Agricultural Business Improvement Scheme.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the hospitals in Scotland which have acute beds and in each case the number of *(a)* intensive care beds, *(b)* high dependency beds and *(c)* other acute beds. [65082]

Mr. Galbraith: Information on the numbers of intensive care and other acute beds is shown in the table. Separate numbers for high dependency beds are not collected and such beds are therefore included in the figures shown for other acute beds.

NHS hospitals in Scotland—intensive care and other acute beds by hospital as at 31 March 1998

	Average available staffed beds	
	Intensive care[1]	Other acute[2]
Argyll and Clyde Health Board Area		
Campbeltown Hospital	—	20
Dunoon and District General Hospital	—	48
Helensburgh Victoria Infirmary	—	8
Inverclyde Royal Hospital	15	310
Islay Hospital	—	24
Lorn and Islands DGH, Oban	—	70
Mid Argyll Hospital	—	15
Rothesay Victoria Hospital	—	20
Royal Alexandra Hospital	11	421
Vale of Leven District General Hospital	—	139
Ayrshire and Arran Health Board Area		
Arran War Memorial Hospital	—	20
Ayrshire Central and Maternity Hospital	—	49
Ballochmyle Hospital	—	12
Crosshouse Hospital	5	457
Davidson Cottage Hospital	—	28
Lady Margaret Hospital, Millport	—	14
The Ayr Hospital	6	307
Borders Health Board Area		
Borders General Hospital	4	243
Coldstream Cottage Hospital	—	11
Hawick Cottage Hospital	—	23
Hay Lodge Hospital	—	20
Kelso Hospital	—	16
Knoll Hospital	—	13
Sister Margaret Cottage Hospital	—	6
Dumfries and Galloway Health Board Area		
Castle Douglas Hospital	—	8
Cresswell Maternity Hospital	—	12
Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary	13	289
Garrick Hospital	—	40
Kirkcudbright Hospital	—	14
Moffat Hospital	—	10
Newton Stewart Hospital	—	9
Fife Health Board Area		
Adamson Hospital	—	25
Cameron Hospital, Windygates	—	2
Forth Park Hospital	—	39
Glenrothes Hospital	—	12
Netherlea Hospital	—	6
Queen Margaret Hospital	11	248
Randolph Wemyss Memorial Hospital	—	15
St. Andrews Memorial Hospital	—	29
Victoria Hospital, Kirkcaldy	11	312
Forth Valley Health Board Area		
Falkirk and District Royal Infirmary	7	251
Stirling Royal Infirmary	9	293
Grampian Health Board Area		
Aberdeen Maternity Hospital	—	40
Aberdeen Royal Infirmary	23	947
Aboyne Hospital	—	11
Campbell Hospital	—	5
Chalmers Hospital	—	39
Dr. Gray's Hospital	—	153
Fleming Cottage Hospital	—	9
Fraserburgh Hospital	—	21
Glen O'Dee Hospital	—	11
Huntly Jubilee Hospital	—	30
Hyperbaric Centre	--	1
Insch and District War Memorial Hospital	—	13
Inverurie Hospital	—	20
Kincardine Community Hospital	—	1
Kincardine O'Neil War Memorial Hospital	—	6
Leanchoil Hospital	—	23
Maud Hospital	—	4
Peterhead Cottage Hospital	—	26
Roxburghe House	—	21
Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital	2	92
Seafield Hospital	—	15
Spynie Hospital	—	30
Stephen Cottage Hospital	—	10
Tor-na-dee Hospital	—	69
Turner Memorial Hospital	—	19
Turriff Cottage Hospital	—	13
Woodcot Hospital	—	15
Woodend General Hospital	—	120
Greater Glasgow Health Board Area		
Canniesburn Hospital	—	75
Glasgow Royal Infirmary	8	663
Queen Mother's Hospital	28	—
RHSC, Glasgow	12	260
Royal Maternity Hospital, Glasgow	10	29
Ruchill Hospital	—	19
Rutherglen Maternity Hospital	—	17
Southern General Hospital	12	550
Stobhill Hospital	9	351
Victoria Infirmary, Glasgow	15	438
Western Infirmary, Glasgow	19	850
Highland Health Board Area		
Belford Hospital	—	45
Caithness General Hospital	—	63
Dunbar Hospital	—	15
Gesto Hospital	—	14
Ian Charles Hospital	—	11
Lawson Memorial Hospital	—	15
Mackinnon Memorial Hospital	—	24
Nairn Town and County Hospital	—	19

NHS hospitals in Scotland—intensive care and other acute beds by hospital as at 31 March 1998

	Average available staffed beds	
	Intensive care[1]	*Other acute*[2]
Portree Hospital	—	12
Raigmore Hospital	10	493
Ross Memorial Hospital	—	30
Royal Northern Infirmary	—	52
Lanarkshire Health Board Area		
Bellshill Maternity Hospital	—	34
Hairmyres Hospital	10	336
Kello Hospital	—	22
Lady Home Hospital	—	22
Law Hospital	11	411
Lockhart Hospital	—	28
Monklands District General Hospital	17	425
Stonehouse Hospital	—	128
Victoria Cottage Hospital	—	17
Lothian Health Board Area		
Astley Ainslie Hospital	—	83
Belhaven Hospital	—	12
Eastern General Hospital	—	120
Edinburgh City Hospital	—	88
Edinburgh Royal Infirmary	16	619
Edington Cottage Hospital	—	9
Princess Margaret Rose Hospital	—	76
RHSC, Edinburgh	6	114
Roodlands General Hospital	—	21
Royal Victoria Hospital, Edinburgh	—	2
Simpson Memorial Maternity Pavilion	—	37
St. John's Hospital at Howden	10	295
Western General Hospital, Edinburgh	15	458
Orkney Health Board Area		
Balfour Hospital	—	61
Eastbank Hospital	—	78
Shetland Health Board Area		
Gilbert Bain Hospital	—	54
Tayside Health Board Area		
Aberfeldy Cottage Hospital	—	9
Arbroath Infirmary	—	22
Blairgowrie Cottage Hospital	—	26
Brechin Infirmary	—	21
Crieff Community Hospital	—	26
Dundee Limb Fitting Centre	—	17
Dundee Royal Infirmary	—	211
Forfar Infirmary	—	26
Irvine Memorial Hospital	—	11
Kings Cross Hospital	—	94
Montrose Royal Infirmary	—	12
Ninewells Hospital	17	539
Perth Royal Infirmary	8	230
Royal Victoria Hospital	—	21
St. Margaret's Hospital	—	16
Stracathro Hospital	4	134
Western Isles Health Board Area		
Daliburgh Hospital	—	13
Lochmaddy Hospital	—	4
St. Brendan's Hospital	—	2
Western Isles Hospital	—	98
Scotland	353	14,799

[1] Comprises the following facilities: Intensive Care Unit and Cardiac Care Unit

[2] Includes Acute, Supra-Area and Special Categories speciality groups. Excludes Obstetrics and Intensive Care

Source:
ISD Scotland

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Standing Committee on Regional Affairs

Miss Melanie Johnson: To ask the President of the Council what plans she has for the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs. [65972]

Mrs. Beckett: The Government have been considering the means of improving the way in which Parliament can debate the affairs of the English regions. I shall shortly be submitting a memorandum to the Modernisation Committee inviting it to examine the possibility of reviving and adapting the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs already allowed for under the Standing Orders of the House.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Council on what dates *(a)* the Ministerial Group on the Millennium Date Change (MISC4) and *(b)* the Sub-Group (MISC4(P)) have met; and what meetings are planned for the future. [64822]

Mrs. Beckett: Details relating to the meetings of Cabinet Committees are not normally made public. This is in line with the practice of successive Administrations.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Emissions

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what contribution he expects the electricity generation sector to make towards reducing CO_2 emissions by 2010, other than the reductions resulting from use of new CHP plant. [65333]

Mr. Meale: The Government intend to develop a balanced and equitable strategy across all sectors to meet the UK's international and domestic climate change targets. As a first step, on 26 October 1998, the Government published a consultation paper describing progress to date in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the UK and setting out a variety of policy options for further action. The consultation paper refers to a number of options which could be taken in the electricity generation sector to reduce carbon dioxide emissions including increased use of CHP, increased use of renewable energy, improvements in energy efficiency, implementation of Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) regulation and improved utility regulation.

Driving Tests

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the income was from practical driving tests in *(a)* 1990 to

30 June 1996, *(b)* 1 July 1996 to 31 December 1996 and *(c)* 1 January 1997 to date; and what it has been for theory tests since 1 July 1996. [65345]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The figures requested are as follows:

£ million

Period	*Practical Test Fee Income*
1 April 1990—30 June 1996	298.8
1 July 1996—31 December 1996	32.8
1 January 1997—30 November 1998	86.5

Figures for November 1998 are the latest currently available.

The income from theory test fees from 1 July 1996 to 30 November 1998 was £48.6m.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many practical driving tests were conducted in the periods *(a)* 1990 to 30 June 1996, *(b)* 1 July 1996 to 31 December 1996 and *(c)* 1 January 1997 to date; and what percentages were (i) passes and (ii) failures in each period. [65339]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The figures my hon. Friend requested are shown in the table.

Period	*Tests conducted*	*Tests passed*	*Pass rate (per cent.)*	*Failure rate (per cent.)*
1 January 1990–30 June 1996	10,257,744	5,019,145	48.93	51.07
1 July 1996–31 December 1996	855,037	381,263	44.59	55.41
1 January 1997–30 November 1998[1]	2,038,122	950,479	46.64	53.36

[1] Figures for November 1998 are the latest currently available

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what effect the closure of driving test centres has had on waiting times for driving test appointments. [65343]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Test centre closures have not affected average waiting times for driving test appointments as the overall capacity to conduct tests has not been affected. The driving examiners from the closed centres have been re-deployed to adjoining centres.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people who have taken the theory test and passed have not applied to take a practical driving test; and what steps the DSA has taken to ensure that those who have passed the theory test apply for a practical driving test within two years. [65341]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We estimate that there are around 300,000 people who have passed the theory test but do not currently have an appointment for a practical test.

Theory test pass certificates have always shown the date of test pass and stated that the certificate has a two year life. The expiry date on certificates have been given greater prominence since August 1998. The Driving Standards Agency has been sending reminder letters on a quarterly basis to theory test pass holders since last spring. reminders were sent in April to 80,000 people whose theory test pass certificates were over 14 months old, and shortly afterwards to 5,000 people whose certificates were 10 to 13 months old. the Agency has since written in August and November to everybody holding a certificate then over 14 months. The Agency will continue to issue reminder letters until all extant certificates are those carrying a prominent expiry date.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the DSA has to reduce the period within which candidates who have passed a theory test are expected to take a practical test. [65344]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Theory test pass certificates are valid for two years. This provides an ample period for a successful theory test candidate to prepare for the practical driving test. We have no current proposals to reduce that period, but will keep the matter under review.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reductions in examiner staffing levels have occurred following driving test centre closures; what effect future closures will have on examiner staffing levels; and if redundancies are planned. [65362]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No driving examiner redundancies have occurred as a result of test centre closures. Staff were transferred to adjoining test centres to cover the expected increase in demand there. No redundancies are planned, in fact the Driving Standards Agency plans to recruit 85 new examiners during this year.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what service improvements have resulted from savings acquired from the closure of driving test centres; and what future improvements are anticipated. [65357]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Restructuring the test centre estate has helped the Driving Standards Agency to provide a fair and consistent standard of test. Savings have helped fund improvements to the remainder of the estate and to administrative systems, including the new driving test booking system that becomes operational later this year. There has been a series of improvements in customer service targets and new customer service features introduced. These were recognised by the Charter Mark award last year. Savings from future closures will be used to help pay for service improvements in the same way.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the consultative process used by the Driving Standards Agency in areas affected by the closures of driving test centres. [65358]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Driving Standards Agency normally consults interested parties locally, such as the Member of Parliament, the local authority and instructors when considering whether to close a driving test centre. A public consultation meeting is usually held, and all the results of the consultation process are considered before a final decision is taken.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the current waiting times for driving test appointments in each region. [65361]

Ms Glenda Jackson: At 8 January 1999, the average waiting time for a practical car driving test in each of the Driving Standards Agency's operational areas was:

London & South East: 6.28 weeks

Midlands & Eastern: 4.16 weeks

Wales & Western: 3.63 weeks

Northern: 5.19 weeks

Scotland: 4.81 weeks.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps will be taken by the Driving Standards Agency to monitor demand in areas where test centre closures have occurred. [65353]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Following closure of a driving test centre, we monitor the pattern of demand at adjoining centres to ensure it is in line with forecasts. Should demand at these centres give cause for concern, steps are taken to ensure that additional examiners are allocated.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further plans there are for the closure of driving test centres over the next five years apart from those already identified for closure in the next two years; and if he will list the centres affected. [65360]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We do not have a planned list of driving test centre closures over the next five years. We regularly review requirements against demand for driving tests, operational suitability, and the need to provide accommodation that offers a safe working environment for examiners and candidates at a reasonable cost. Should a centre fall short of these criteria its continued viability is considered, each case being considered on its merits with due regard to local factors.

We are currently consulting about the future of the following car driving test centres: Didsbury (Manchester); Washwood Heath (Birmingham); Newport (Monmouthshire); Minehead (Somerset); and Holyhead Road (Coventry).

Consultation has also been completed about the proposed closure of the following centres, but no final decisions have yet been reached: Hartlepool, Rochdale, Cheltenham, Oswestry (Shropshire), Sevenoaks, and Tunbridge Wells, and the Ore (Hastings) lorry and bus driving test centre.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many driving theory tests have been conducted since 1 July 1996, and how many and what percentage of these were *(a)* passes and *(b)* failures. [65340]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The figures requested are given in the tables. For cars and motorcycles they are shown separately for the periods 1 July 1996—30 September 1996 and 1 October 1996—30 November 1998 to reflect the change in the pass mark:

	1 July 1996 to 30 September 1996 Pass mark 26/35		*1 October 1996 to 30 November 1998 Pass mark 30/35*	
	Car	*Motorcycle*	*Car*	*Motorcycle*
Passed	310,765	2,022	1,596,315	13,276
Percentage pass	85.5	92.1	62.9	55.9
Failed	52,823	173	943,718	10,478
Percentage fail	14.5	7.9	37.1	44.1

The lorry and bus theory tests were introduced on 1 January 1997, the figures requested in respect of these tests are as follows:

	1 January 1997 to 30 November 1998 Pass mark 21/25	
	LGV	*PCV*
Passed	42,005	15,990
Percentage pass	88.4	87.8
Failed	5,496	2,215
Percentage fail	11.6	12.2

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what effect the proposed extended driving test will have on waiting times for customers. [65363]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There may be a surge in demand ahead of the new, longer test which could increase waiting times by one to two weeks above the target for the next three months. The Driving Standards Agency will seek to minimise the effects of any surge by ensuring that additional examiners are deployed where necessary.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research is being carried out to identify reasons for falls in demand for theory and practical driving tests; and what results are available. [65365]

Ms Glenda Jackson: When in April 1998 the Driving Standards Agency wrote reminder letters to 85,000 theory test pass certificate holders, around 10,000 were asked why they had not completed the test process. About 1,700 responded. The majority had attempted the practical test and had failed but intended to keep trying. Nearly a quarter had delayed learning for financial or health reasons.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many driving test centres have been closed since the inception of the Driving Standards Agency; in what parts of the country such closures have occurred; and what reasons for closure were given in each case. [65359]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since the launch of the Driving Standards Agency in April 1990, 61 driving test centres have been closed without direct replacement in the immediate vicinity, in the following areas:

	Number
London & South East	11
Midlands & Eastern	15
Wales & Western	14
Northern	12
Scotland	9
Total	61

In addition, Edinburgh (Newington) and Wealdstone (North London) have been agreed for closure later this month.

Closures were caused by routes becoming operationally unsuitable, the expiry of property leases, a rationalisation of centres in the area, for health and safety reasons, or on the grounds of operational costs. The effort involved in documenting the reason, or reasons, for each closure would be disproportionate.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the books on the theory driving test were produced in quick succession; and what steps were taken by the DSA to defray the costs of those customers who bought faulty material. [65372]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The question bank for each type of theory test is revised annually to reflect changes in legislation and other developments. The Driving Standards Agency publishes books containing the question banks before the adoption of new questions so that candidates can prepare for their test.

The edition of the car and motorcycle theory test book published in June 1998 contained a number of errors. A revised edition was issued in August 1998. Candidates who had purchased the June edition were not disadvantaged. Test papers containing questions where a candidate may have been misled by the June edition were withdrawn. Where such questions appeared in test papers before they were withdrawn, incorrect answers were ignored in the marking. Amendment slips were inserted in all unsold copies of that edition, and sent to theory test candidates with their appointment letter.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what increases in the cost of the driving test are being proposed. [65364]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The fee for driving theory test appointments made from 6 April 1999 will be £15.50, an increase of 50 pence on the current fee.

The fees for practical driving tests taken from 4 May 1999 will be as follows:

£

Category of test	*Proposed new fee*	*Current fee*	*Increase*
Weekday Tests			
Car	36.75	32.75	4.00
Motorcycle	45.00	39.00	6.00
Saturday/Weekday Evening Tests			
Car	46.00	43.00	3.00
Motorcycle	55.00	52.00	3.00

The fees for minor categories, such as tractor driving tests, will remain the same as for car tests. Moped tests will be charged the same as motorcycle tests. The fees for lorry and bus tests will remain unaltered at £73.50 for weekday tests and £92.00 for Saturday and weekday evening tests.

Driving Instructors

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the purpose is of check tests of approved driving instructors; and what effect such tests have had on pass rates since their introduction. [65367]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The check test was introduced in the early 1970s to allow the Department to test an Approved Driving Instructor's continued ability and fitness to give instruction, in the interest of both road safety and consumer protection. It allows the supervising examiner to identify any weaknesses in an instructor's tuition and offer constructive criticism on how he or she might improve their teaching methods.

Although the pass rates for the practical driving test are the same today as they were at the time the check test was introduced its introduction saw a levelling out of a falling pass rate that had gone from 50 per cent. in 1950 to 51 per cent. in 1960 and to 46 per cent. in the early 1970s. The current pass rate is 48 per cent.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many approved driving instructors left the register in the periods *(a)* 1990 to 30 June 1996, *(b)* 1 July 1996 to 31 December 1996 and *(c)* 1 January 1997 to date. [65346]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The number of instructors who left the register during the specified periods were:

Date	*Instructors*
1 January 1990 to 30 June 1996	17,715
1 July 1996 to 31 December 1996	1,469
1 January 1997 to 30 November 1998[1]	7,086

[1] Figures for November 1998 are the latest currently available

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many approved driving instructors have ceased to practise but whose licences still have a period to run in the periods *(a)* 1990 to 30 June 1996, *(b)* 1 July 1996 to 31 December 1996 and *(c)* 1 January 1997 to date. [65348]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is not available. We do not know how many of the instructors whose names appear on the register at any given date are not currently practising.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many approved driving instructors have been removed from the register since check testing was introduced. [65349]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since April 1995, 247 instructors have been removed from the register for failing the check test. Statistics for removal for check test failure are not available for the period prior to that date.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is the Driving Standards Agency's intention to use the proposed log book as a means of regulating the teaching methods of approved driving instructors. [65366]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We see merit in introducing a training logbook for learner drivers. This will be introduced on a voluntary basis in the spring. A logbook will provide instructors and their pupils, and others who supervise learners, such as parents, with a syllabus and encourage them to adopt a structured and progressive approach to driver training. The syllabus, which has been developed in consultation with the driving instruction industry, will enable progress to be charted. The logbook identifies the areas that need to be taught. It does not define the teaching methods to be adopted when covering each topic.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many complaints about the check test have been received by the DSA since the test was introduced, broken down by *(a)* test centre and *(b)* the nature of the complaint; and what steps the DSA has taken in response to such complaints. [65373]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Driving Standards Agency does not keep consolidated statistics about the numbers of check test complaints it receives, analysed by test centre or the nature of the complaint. Any complaint from an instructor about a check test would be carefully considered.

Cycling

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by what means he plans to deliver his target of quadrupling cycling by 2012; and if he will make a statement. [65679]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The target of quadrupling the number of trips by bicycle (on 1996 figures) by the end of 2012, was established by the National Cycling Strategy (NCS). In the White Paper "A New Deal for Transport" published last year, we endorsed that target and recognised the positive contribution that cycling can make towards a transport system that is safe, efficient, clean and fair. The Department requires local authorities as part of their local transport plans to establish local cycling strategies which will contribute to the target of increased cycle use. We will continue to offer guidance to authorities on policy and technical issues, and to work in partnership with other organisations in achieving the NCS objectives.

Telecommunications Masts

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to issue supplementary guidance to planning guidance on telecommunications masts under PPG(8). [65616]

Mr. Raynsford: In July 1998, we published for public comment our proposals for changes to the control of development by licensed telecommunications code system operators under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (GPDO). In November, we announced the outcome of this consultation, and, in particular, our intention to proceed with a new single-stage "prior approval" procedure of 42 days for ground-based masts. The Department is currently preparing the necessary GPDO amendment Order and guidance to implement the changes and will consult on drafts shortly.

A404(M) (Noise Amelioration)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to be able to announce his decision on the funding of noise amelioration measures on the A404(M) following the recommendation of the independent report commissioned by the Highways Agency. [65615]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In our White Paper "A New Deal For Trunk Roads" we announced that we intended to set aside budget for the purpose of providing noise mitigation measures for some of the most serious and pressing cases along existing roads. We also said that we would make a separate announcement regarding the criteria to be used. These criteria are still being finalised and we will make a statement setting them down as soon as we can. It is important that the selection criteria we choose are as fair as possible. Decisions on individual cases such as the A404(M) must wait until those criteria are published.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to ensure that United Kingdom passenger aircraft are millennium compliant. [65084]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department has notified all major UK airlines of the need to consider whether their systems will be millennium compliant and advised them to take any remedial action necessary. We are also in close and regular contact with the Civil Aviation Authority (including National Air Traffic Services) who are considering the problem in their role as safety regulator. As part of this process, the CAA are seeking to confirm compliance status of the 2,000 organisations (including UK airlines) which they currently approve. The situation has been and will continue to be monitored on a regular basis. Once the industry has completed their compliance programmes later this year, we will be asking the Chairman of the CAA to provide the Department with appropriate assurances as to the state of readiness of the UK aviation industry. If the CAA have any safety doubts arising from millennium compliance problems, operating authorisations will be withdrawn or withheld.

Air Traffic Services

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the report by Credit Suisse on the proposed public/private partnership for national air traffic services and assess its implications for the private finance initiative contract for the new Scottish centre. [65418]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have retained Credit Suisse First Boston (CSFB) to provide investment banking advice in developing proposals for a public private partnership for National Air Traffic Services Ltd. (NATS). The advice produced by CSFB is commercially sensitive and is provided to the Government in confidence as part of the policy development process for the NATS PPP. As such, it would not be appropriate to publish it.

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the International Civil Aviation Organisation has agreed that the UK Government will continue to provide air traffic services for the Northern Atlantic operation in the event of a public/private partnership for national air traffic services. [65419]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As my right hon. Friend, the Minister of Transport explained in his answer of 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *676*, we are consulting ICAO on our proposals for National Air Traffic Services Ltd.

Highway Works (Compensation)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discretion the Highways Agency has to compensate individual organisations for loss of trade as a result of highway works. [65270]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Where works have been properly carried out by a highway authority under a statutory power, there is no legal liability to compensate for loss of trade. Only in extraordinary circumstances would the Highways Agency consider a discretionary or ex-gratia payment. Where works are carried out on land which has been compulsorily purchased, there may, in certain circumstances, be compensation for injurious affection but not for loss of trade.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid (Funding Code)

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department when the legal aid board will publish its consultation document on the proposed funding code. [66360]

Mr. Hoon: The consultation document, "The Funding Code—a new approach to funding civil cases", will be published tomorrow. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. Consultees have until 30 April 1999 to respond.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Industrial Tribunal Claims

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications to industrial tribunals in respect of pensions claims have been abandoned since 1994 because the claimant has died. [64233]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Employment Tribunals Service does not record the reasons why cases are withdrawn and cannot therefore provide any information on the number of pension claims that have been abandoned because the claimant has died.

Home Shopping

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from the home shopping industry in relation to consumer credit agreements; and if he will make a statement. [65306]

Dr. Howells: I have received a number of representations from the home shopping industry, both independently and in response to the question posed in a consultation paper the Department issued last year on whether the legislation should be changed to make unsigned consumer credit agreements for mail order sales enforceable.

I have carefully considered the evidence which all consultees representing many interests put to the Department. I have decided not to make unsigned agreements enforceable since I have been given clear evidence that some consumers are suffering detriment from the practices adopted by some mail order firms. In addition to signing nothing, some consumers are not receiving copies of mail order credit agreements. This leads to confusion about the debt owed and the terms and conditions on which the credit has been provided, which can also reflect unfairly on credit worthiness. I am concerned that some mail order companies may not be satisfying the requirements of the European Consumer Credit Directive and the Distance Selling Directive on giving written information to consumers.

Social Chapter

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the consequences of the introduction of Social Chapter legislation for employment in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [64054]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on 12 December 1997, *Official Report*, columns *725–26*.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what guidelines have been issued to the manufacturing and retail industries regarding the millennium bug; what steps have been taken to ensure that new products are millennium compliant and are labelled as such; and if he will make a statement. [65085]

Mr. Wills: Information on the Millennium Bug and guidance on how to deal with it is available to businesses from Action 2000. My Department set up Action 2000 last year to lead the work on behalf of the Government in raising awareness of the private sector of the need to take action and to provide help to companies.

Under the Sale of Goods Act 1979, goods sold by traders must among other things "correspond with description" as to fitness for purpose and satisfactory quality. The description of the goods includes any information given about them, by the seller directly or by any other means. Controls already exist to prevent new products being falsely described or labelled as millennium compliant. The Trade Descriptions Act 1968 makes it a criminal offence to apply false or misleading statements to products.

Energy Investment

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what sums of money have been invested by the Government since May 1997 in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the United Kingdom as a whole, into (i) the nuclear industry, (ii) the coal industry, (iii) the oil and gas industries and (iv) the renewable energy industry, in each case including funds for research and development. [65083]

Mr. Battle: Most of my Department's programme expenditure is in support of national objectives, with expenditure not separately identified for Scotland. Exceptions are DRAWMOPS (decommissioning of nuclear facilities) and nuclear safeguards R&D (although the latter is spent in the UK, its objectives are to provide services for the International Atomic Energy Agency). Between May 1997 and December 1998, programme expenditure in the categories mentioned was as follows (in £ million, includes estimates for Q4 1998):

	Scotland	*UK*
Nuclear		
Fusion	—	23.78
DRAWMOPS	127.94	255.88
Safeguards	0.14	2.05
Coal		
Clean coal combustion[1]	—	4.42
Oil and Gas		
Offshore environmental programme	—	0.14
Hydrocarbon Additional Recovery programme	—	5.30
Renewables[2]	—	15.70

[1] Other clean coal technology related projects are being supported via the Foresight Challenge competition and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

[2] Support for renewables research via the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council was £4.04 million between May 1997 and December 1998.

HEALTH

Emissions (Mortality and Morbidity Rates)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the effect on mortality and morbidity rates which would result from annual reductions in emissions of (i) 425,000 tonnes of SO_2, (ii) 137,000 tonnes of NO_x, (iii) 14,000 tonnes of fine particulates and (iv) 6,000 tonnes of black smoke; and what evaluation he has made of the estimates of mortality and morbidity given in quantification of the effects of air pollution on health in the United Kingdom (Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants, 1998). [65334]

Ms Jowell: A detailed estimate of the effects of air pollution on health was published in a Report issued last year by the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants (COMEAP), *Quantification of the Effects of Air Pollution on Health in the United Kingdom*. The Committee concluded that current levels of air pollution probably play an important role in bringing forward the deaths of at least between 12,000 and 24,000 vulnerable people each year and a similar number of hospital admissions, though it stressed that air pollution is likely to be one of a number of factors affecting the clinical condition of seriously ill people.

The review of the national air quality strategy, as announced by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on 13 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *214–15, re-examines the prospects for reducing emissions of eight pollutants covered by the Strategy and the effect that this would have on ambient levels of air pollution. This Department's Report, Economic Appraisal of the Health Effects of Air Pollution*, also published yesterday in association with the review, contains an overview of the health effects of air pollution adding to that presented in the COMEAP Report.

Attention Deficit Disorder Syndrome

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research commissioned by his Department has been carried out into attention deficit disorder syndrome in the last three years. [64910]

Ms Jowell: We fund health and medical research in a number of ways:

The Department funds research and development to support its work on policy development and evaluation in health and social care. The Department also manages the National Health Service research and development levy which is used to support research and development of relevance to the National Health Service in hospitals, general practice and other health care settings, and to fund the NHS research and development programme. In addition, the Medical Research Council—which receives most of its income via grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology in the Department of Trade and Industry—funds medical research as part of the Government's funding of the science and engineering base.

Details of projects directly funded by the Department or supported through the NHS research and development levy can be found on the National Research Register (NRR). This is available in most medical libraries and in the Library on CD Rom, and on the Internet: http://www.doh.gov.uk/nrr.htm. The NRR also contains many details of projects/trials funded by the MRC and other funders.

NHS Executive, South Thames have commissioned a project "Pathways to treatment in children at risk of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and hyperkinetic disorder" at Kings College Hospital.

The MRC supports a number of studies into the causes and treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Current support is centred on cognitive and behavioural strategies carried out at the MRC Child Psychiatry Unit in London. There have also been some recent MRC funded genetics studies carried out at the Institute of Psychiatry and the University of Manchester.

The NRR indicates that other NHS trusts are undertaking research in the field.

Priorities for Departmental research and development support for the development of policy are determined through discussion with policy colleagues, the Departmental Research Committee and Ministers. In the NHS research and development programme, priorities

take account of widespread consultation with those using, delivering and managing services, with a framework overseen by the Central Research and Development Committee for the NHS. In all cases, priorities for our budgets reflect analysis of the burden of disease, potential benefits, Government priorities and take account of the responsibilities and work of other funders.

Regional offices of the NHS Executive run response mode funding schemes to which applications of relevance to the NHS can be made. The MRC also always welcomes high quality applications for support into any aspect of human health and these are judged in open competition with other demands on funding. Awards are made by both the NHS and the MRC according to the scientific quality and importance of proposals.

Autism

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what data his Department have collated with respect to the incidence of autism in children; and if he will list the number of such children in each of the last 20 years. [64912]

Mr. Hutton: The Department does not collate information about the incidence of autism in children. It is for the local statutory authorities to determine the needs of children with autism in their area and work together effectively to ensure that these needs are met.

Services for Older People

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the timetable is for the development of a National Service framework for the care of older people; and when the consultation will take place. [65324]

Mr. Hutton: The process for the development of the national service framework for the care of older people is already underway, and the framework will be operational from April 2000. Co-chairs of the External Reference Group that will advise the Government on the development of the framework were announced on 21 December 1998 and it is expected that the External Reference Group will be formed within the next month.

The External Reference Group will draw on views from all stakeholders in the care of older people throughout the process.

Children's Rights

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress made on the Government's report on the implementation of the United Nations convention on children's rights; and if he will make a statement. [65255]

Mr. Hutton: The Government have been making good progress with the preparation of the Second United Kingdom report on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The process was launched in February 1998 with a national conference in London which discussed key timetable and procedural requirements. Reports from across Government Departments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were assembled into a consultative draft which was circulated to NGOs in November. In addition, the Government have been greatly assisted by an advisory group which has included NGOs from across the UK. Ministers will be considering the final draft of the UK report in the New Year and it is expected to be sent to the Committee on Children in Geneva in March 1999 and published shortly thereafter in the UK.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the role of *(a)* children's rights commissioners, *(b)* children's ombudspersons and *(c)* independent officers for children in other European countries; and if he will publish the results. [65256]

Mr. Hutton: We have recently made a number of announcements which take into account the recommendations of the Health Select Committee on Children Looked After by Local Authorities (July 1998) and the Children's Safeguards Review (1997). In the White Paper on Social Services (November 1998) and the Government response to the Health Select Committee (December 1998), we made commitments to introduce new mechanisms which will enable it and other responsible agencies to keep issues of children's rights and safeguards under careful scrutiny. These include establishing children's rights officers in each of the eight Commissions for Care Standards; periodic joint reporting from all the inspectorates dedicated exclusively to children; and continuing the work of the ministerial task force on children's safeguards. In addition, work on listening to and responding to the views and aspirations of children is a priority area for grant to local authorities within the quality protects programme.

These announcements were made having taken into account information on the 10 or so other countries known to have national Children's Rights Commissioner or posts with similar titles. We are not in present circumstances persuaded that it would be desirable to create such a national mechanism additional to the roles of the courts, the police and the prosecuting authorities, the various Commissions (Parliamentary, Health and local government) which already exist, the responsibilities of local and health authorities to deal with complaints and the various inspection and regulatory arrangements for ensuring that safeguards for children are properly implemented, and that their voices are heard.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many asylum seekers have required treatment for *(a)* nutritional disease, *(b)* psychological illnesses and *(c)* AIDS-related illnesses in the last three years; [65470]

(2) what has been the cost to the NHS of treating asylum seekers in each of the last three years [65469]

Mr. Hutton: National Health Service hospital treatment, received by a patient who has made a formal application to the Government for permission to take refuge in the United Kingdom, is the responsibility of the health authority for the district in which they are residing. Details on the types of treatment required, the numbers and the total cost to the NHS of such patients is not held centrally.

Trust Merger (Bedfordshire)

Sir David Madel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to make a decision on the

proposal to merge the South Bedfordshire Community Health Care Trust and the Bedford and Shires Health Care Trust; and if he will make a statement. [65516]

Mr. Denham: The submission is currently with Ministers and a decision will be announced shortly.

Anglusia and Anosmia

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in the United Kingdom suffer from *(a)* anglusia, *(b)* anosmia, and *(c)* both anglusia and anosmia; what research his Department (i) is conducting and (ii) has commissioned into the (A) cause and (B) treatment of these problems; and if loss of these senses is defined by his Department as a disability. [65619]

Mr. Hutton: The National Health Service does not collect centrally the numbers of people suffering from anglusia (we believe this is an incorrect name for a disease resulting in loss of smell) and anosmia, and is not currently commissioning any research in this area.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 defines a disability as

"A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities".

The Department would use this definition, which may be applicable to these cases.

Medicines Control Agency

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the draft Statutory Instrument published on 6 November by the Medicines Control Agency in Consultation Document MLX 249 was at that time circulated to right hon. and hon. Members; if he approved that draft Statutory Instrument; and if it is the intention of the Agency to seek implementation of that draft Statutory Instrument by 1 April. [65722]

Ms Jowell: As is the usual practice, copies of the Medicines Control Agency's Consultation Letter MLX 249 were placed in the Library. We will decide in due course whether and when legislative proposals are to be brought before the House.

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service (Delegations)

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what delegations have been made in 1998 under the Civil Service (Management Functions) Act 1992; to whom those delegations were made; and what were the main conditions attached to them. [66129]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: Since the last report to Parliament, on 13 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *162*, Ministers and statutory office holders in charge of departments[1] have been given delegated authority (from 1 April 1998) under the Civil Service (Management Functions) Act 1992 to determine in respect of home civil servants in their respective departments the recruitment standards for health and coping with the demands of the job.

The delegation was subject to the condition that recipients comply with the provisions of the Civil Service Management Code as amended from time to time. Copies of the Civil Service Management Code are available in the Library of the House.

[1] The statutory office holders are:

Commissioners of Inland Revenue

Head of the Registry of Friendly Societies, being the Chief Registrar of Friendly societies and the First Commissioner of the Building Societies Commission

Chief Charity Commissioner

Commissioners of Customs and Excise

Crown Estate Commissioners

Director General of Electricity Supply

Director General of Fair Trading

Director General of Gas Supply

Director General of National Lottery

Director of National Savings

Director of Passenger Rail Franchising

Director General of Telecommunications

Director General of Water Services

Director of Public Prosecutions

Director of the Serious Fraud Office

Government Actuary

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales

International Rail Regulator

Public Works Loan Commissioners

Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and Health Service Commissioners

Rail Regulator

Registrar General for Scotland.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Nuclear Fuels

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the proliferation risks posed by the use of plutonium-mixed-oxide based nuclear fuels. [64816]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, on 2 December 1997, *Official Report*, column *122*.

Ambassador's Residence

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what prices were accepted by his Department for the British Ambassador's residence and associated property which were for sale by public tender on 2 December. [65683]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *403*, in respect of the sale of the Glencairn Estate in Dublin. Tenders have now been evaluated, but we have not yet closed the sale. Even when we do, it is not our policy to reveal details of price and other terms agreed in such transactions.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the human rights implications of the trial of Hilary Boma and Lino Sebit in Sudan; and if he will make a statement. [64841]

Mr. Fatchett: There have been a number of disturbing allegations about the trial of those people charged with plotting and carrying out the bombings in Khartoum in June 1998. We have raised these with the Sudanese authorities in Khartoum and in London.

At the end of December, the Constitutional Circle of the Sudanese High Court ruled that the trial of 20 defendants, including the two Catholic priests Hilary Boma and Lino Sebit, be suspended while the High Court considers an appeal challenging the legality of the defendants being tried before a military court.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Sierra Leone. [65699]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are very concerned by the current situation in Sierra Leone. The democratically elected government remains under direct threat from a strong rebel force. We are closely monitoring the humanitarian situation. We fully support the democratically elected government of Sierra Leone; and the efforts of the Military Observer Group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG) to restore peace and security. We are providing £3 million worth of direct logistic assistance to ECOMOG and the Government of Sierra Leone. HMS Norfolk, a Type 23 frigate, has been instructed to move to the region as a precautionary measure. We are monitoring events in Sierra Leone carefully. We are in close touch with the United Nations and others about the situation on the ground.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps have been taken by the Government to publicise the legal position on the supply of arms to Sierra Leone since the publication of the Legg report; and if he will make a statement. [65704]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Following the adoption by the Security Council on 5 June 1998 of a new resolution on the supply of arms to Sierra Leone, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary issued a press statement welcoming its adoption. On 16 June 1998 I described the content of the resolution in my written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby), *Official Report*, column *199*, drawing attention to the fact that the resolution would ensure that the arms embargo on Sierra Leone applied to non-governmental forces but made explicit exemption for ECOMOG and the United Nations. I also explained that Orders in Council were being prepared to give full effect to the resolution in UK law.

In addition to my right hon. Friend's press statement the FCO News Department briefed the media extensively on the details of the resolution both before and after its adoption. In addition a telegram issued on 23 July informing all FCO and Whitehall Departments, and posts overseas, of the scope and implications of the provisions of the Orders in Council.

These steps were taken before the publication of the Legg report on 27 July.

Iraq

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on reports that information obtained by UNSCOM inspectors in Iraq was made available to the United States Government; if any such information was made available to Her Majesty's Government; what inquiries he has made into such reports; and what discussions he has had with the US Government concerning these reports. [65696]

Mr. Fatchett: Both the UK and US Governments have made clear that all information exchanges between themselves and UNSCOM have been strictly in pursuit of UNSCOM's mandate to dismantle Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Iraq. [65697]

Mr. Fatchett: We are currently considering ideas with friends and allies for a way forward on Iraq. Discussions in the Security Council are focusing on disarmament questions and the humanitarian situation in Iraq. We are also looking with EU partners at proposals for alleviating the suffering to which Saddam Hussein continues to subject the Iraqi people.

Arms Supplies

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what evidence he has obtained of British companies supplying weapons to *(a)* the Congo, *(b)* Uganda and *(c)* Liberia; and if he will make a statement; [65698]

(2) what evidence he has obtained of possible breaches of the UN embargo on arms supplies to Sierra Leone; what investigation he has ordered into reports of such breaches; and if he will make a statement; [65703]

(3) what evidence he has obtained of British companies supplying weapons to Sierra Leone; what investigation he has ordered into reports of such supplies; and if he will make a statement. [65702]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A recent newspaper article alleged that two British companies may have been involved in supplying arms to Sierra Leone, via the Gambia and Liberia, in breach of the UN arms embargo. The article also alleged that one of the companies may have delivered arms to the DRC via Uganda and Rwanda. The FCO have drawn these allegations to the attention of Customs and Excise who are responsible for the investigation and prosecution of any alleged breaches of UK legislation implementing arms embargoes.

Kosovo

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Kosovo. [65682]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The OSCE-led Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) has already demonstrated its ability to make real difference to the situation on the ground by negotiating local ceasefires in Podujevo during the

Christmas weekend and playing an instrumental role in negotiations concerning the release of 8 Yugoslav soldiers seized by the UCK on 8 January. There are currently 745 KVM personnel on the ground in Kosovo, 110 of whom are British.

It is crucial that the ceasefire be maintained. We are concerned at the rising tensions in recent weeks, with provocations from both sides. We have called on both sides to show restraint and pursue their objectives through negotiations.

The UK is pressing for rapid progress on the political track which alone can tackle the roots of the problem, and fully supports the efforts of US Envoy Ambassador Chris Hill and EU Special Envoy Ambassador Petritsch. This is not a conflict which either side can win militarily, and now above all is the time for the Government in Belgrade and the leaders of the Kosovo Albanians to show the courage and vision to engage seriously in negotiations with direct international involvement.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Teachers

14. **Sir David Madel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for the future of the teaching profession. [64049]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government are investing £19 billion extra over the next three years to improve education in the UK. Part of this investment is intended to modernise the teaching profession. The Green Paper, "Teachers: meeting the challenge of change", published in early December, set out a wide-ranging vision of stronger school leadership; rewards for success and incentives for excellence; a stronger culture of personal development; and better support in the classroom.

Numeracy Hour

15. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what evidence he has obtained of the effectiveness of the numeracy hour in primary schools. [64050]

Ms Estelle Morris: Reports from OFSTED and the National Foundation for Educational Research both point to the success of the daily mathematics lesson piloted in the National Numeracy Project. The daily lesson is an important part of the National Numeracy Strategy and will begin in primary schools this September.

Sex Education

16. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of sex education in schools. [64053]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Reports from the Office for Standards in Education have indicated that standards of sex education are adequate or better in most schools. The Government wish to build on the good practice which exists.

Information Technology

17. **Mr. Stunell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans the Government have to encourage greater use of information technology in education. [64055]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government's plans for Information and Communications Technologies in education were set out in 'Our Information Age' and in the Government's National Grid for Learning Challenge, 'Open for Learning, Open for Business', which were published last year. Copies are available in the Library.

33. **Mr. Allan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the role of information technology in reducing the administrative work load of teachers. [64073]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information and communication technologies (ICT) have a central role to play in reducing the bureaucratic burden on teachers, particularly in reducing the burdens involved in administration and in preparing for lessons. Key targets for the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) include that by 2002, serving teachers should feel confident and be competent to teach using ICT within the curriculum, and all general administrative communications with schools and collection of data from schools should largely cease to be paper-based.

These targets were set out in the NGfL consultation paper *Connecting the Learning Society* and subsequent challenge paper *Open for Learning, open for business.* They were re-affirmed in our Green Paper on modernising the teaching profession. We are taking forward a wide-ranging programme of work to ensure they are met, including:

- providing over £700m for ICT in UK schools up to 2002, and a further £230 from the New Opportunities Fund from 1999 for teacher training in the curriculum use of ICT;
- developing high quality materials for the National Grid for Learning and the DfEE Standards Site, including non-mandatory schemes of work to help teachers plan their work. We are also working with and encouraging other public and private sector organisations to do the same;
- improving our ability to collect and share data electronically and communicate electronically with schools and Local Education Authorities.

But improving the use of ICT is not the only way to cut bureaucracy. We need to reduce burdens on teachers in other ways too, including cutting the amount of unnecessary paper they have to deal with and ensuring they have adequate support in their work. We are working vigorously to ensure that happens, so that teachers can focus on raising standards for all children.

Disabled People (Civil Rights)

18. **Mr. Stephen Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress he has made in securing civil rights for the disabled. [64056]

Ms Hodge: The Disability Rights Task Force, which I chair, has reported on the role and functions of a Disability Rights Commission and the Government have recently introduced a Bill to establish the Commission. The Task Force is now looking at what further rights disabled people might need and is due to make its final recommendations by July.

In the meantime we are pressing ahead with the implementation of the later rights in Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1950. The first phase will come into force in October, with the second phase due in 2004. They will give disabled people important new rights in relation to access to goods, facilities and services.

We have also taken an early opportunity to reduce the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 exemption threshold and bring more small employers into the DDA's employment provisions. Other Government initiatives include the extension, from October 1999, of Part M of the building regulations *Access and Facilities for Disabled People* to cover all new dwellings with the aim of enabling disabled people to visit friends and relatives more easily and to manage reducing mobility better, remaining in their own homes for longer.

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations came into effect in November 1998. Full guidance will be issued to all those affected early this year. The guidance will be a source of information to the industry on a range of issues, for example, the use of colour contrast in vehicle liveries and will apply to all new rail vehicles entering service from 1 January 1999.

New Deal (Medway)

19. **Mr. Shaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the total investment in schools in Medway through the new deal has been to date. [64058]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Medway schools were included in those projects which were supported by Kent Local Education Authority in the first round of the New Deal for Schools in September 1997. The Department allocated £1,159,927 to Kent Local Education Authority to support projects costing £1,267,173 in this round. A further £1,186,618 was allocated specifically to the Medway Unitary Authority in April 1998 as part of the second round of the New Deal for Schools to support projects costing £1,228,134.

Higher Education Funding

21. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on funding of higher education. [64061]

Mr. Mudie: As a result of the modernisation of funding arrangements for higher education, an extra £776 million will be available for higher education over the next two years, 1999–2000, and 2000–2001 under the plans announced on 8 December 1998.

This very good settlement will allow for growth in student numbers, for improving quality and raising standards, for investment in teaching and IT infrastructure and for boosting research.

Disability Rights Commission

22. **Ms Christine Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to establish the Disability Rights Commission. [64062]

Ms Hodge: The Disability Rights Commission Bill was introduced into Parliament on 3 December 1998 and had its second reading in the House of Lords on 17 December 1998. Subject to Parliament enacting the Bill we would expect the Commission to be established in the year 2000.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure maximum access to the Disability Rights Commission. [64045]

Mr. Blunkett: We want the Disability Rights Commission to help as many people as possible. The Commission will be expected to ensure that its services are accessible to all those who seek to use them taking full account of the needs of disabled people.

Drugs Misuse

23. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance relating to drug-misuse has been issued to schools by his Department since the appointment of the UK anti-drugs co-ordinator in October 1997. [64063]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department published on 18 November 1998 guidance on good practice in drug education in schools and the youth service. It includes advice for teachers and youth workers on the effective delivery of drug education, and on dealing with drug-related incidents. The guidance was sent to all Chief Education Officers of local education authorities, and is available to all schools free of charge.

The Department also published in March last year a booklet summarising a number of innovative drug education projects supported through the Department's Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) programme in 1996–97. It offers a number of examples of the range of different approaches teachers and others may like to use in the delivery of drug education.

Copies of both publications are in the Library.

Literacy Hour

24. **Mr. Heppell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what impact the literacy hour has had on standards of literacy in primary schools. [64064]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Literacy Hour began in primary schools in September 1998. The vast majority of teachers are teaching the daily hour, which has had a considerable impact on teaching methods and organisation of lessons. Evaluations of the pilot National Literacy Project, published last month by OFSTED and the NFER, confirm that the Literacy Hour is based on teaching methods that will raise standards. Children who started some way below the national average in their reading scores made eight to 12 months progress above what would normally be expected, in less than two years.

Higher Education

25. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what actions he is taking to encourage access to higher education. [64065]

28. **Mr. Pound:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to encourage access to higher education. [64068]

Mr. Mudie: We have doubled Access Funds and extended them to part-time students; increased the number of student places; enabled the Higher Education Funding Council for England to allow funding of £30 million per annum for widening participation activities and provided for fees to be waived for part-time students on benefits or who have lost their jobs during their study. Further measures are under consideration.

Further Education Funding

26. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for funding of further education. [64066]

Mr. Mudie: This Government have announced that further education colleges will have £725 million more over the next two years. This will enable major progress to be made towards providing for an extra 700,000 students in further education by 2001–02 and raising standards across the sector.

School Councils

27. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of schools which currently have school councils. [64067]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department does not collect such data centrally. However, in a survey for the Institute of Citizenship Studies—*Citizenship Education in Primary Schools (Kerr 1996)*, 14 per cent. of the 144 schools responding said they had a school council; some 75 per cent. said they involved pupils in negotiating rules on behaviour. In a similar survey of secondary schools—*Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools—a national survey (Fogelman 1991)*—around 60 per cent. of the 455 schools surveyed said they had school councils.

Education Welfare Officers

29. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to improve the training and qualifications of education welfare officers. [64069]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him on 22 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *1189–90*.

Three-year-olds

30. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been allocated to local authorities to enable them to provide pre-school places for three-year-olds. [64070]

Ms Hodge: On 30 December 1998, the Department announced that we would be making available £390 million additional funding for over the next three years. This will enable the participation rate for three-year-olds in early education to approximately double to 66 per cent. by 2002. I should also add that there has been an increase of 9½ per cent. in Local Education Authority's standard spending assessments. Local Education Authorities can spend this money on early years education if they wish.

School Reforms

31. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to monitor the implementation of his reforms in schools. [64071]

Ms Estelle Morris: The overall effect of our education reforms on schools standards will be monitored through the annual collation and publication of examination and test results, and through the continuing inspection programme of OFSTED. There will also be evaluation of the impact of individual policies.

Internet

32. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimates he has made of the number of schools connected to the Internet; and if he will make a statement. [64072]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Latest estimates indicate that over 12,000 schools are connected to the Internet. Our aim is that all schools should be online and able to benefit from access the National Grid for Learning by 2002. To help achieve this target we are supporting over £700 million of ICT-related expenditure in UK schools over this period.

Youth Service

34. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for the youth service. [64074]

Mr. Mudie: I refer my hon. Friend to my oral answer today, *Official Report*, column *431*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope).

Class Sizes

35. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the number of children between the ages of seven and 11 years currently being taught in classes of over 30 in maintained schools in England. [64075]

Ms Estelle Morris: In January 1998 there were 832,668 pupils in Key Stage 2 classes of more than 30 pupils taught by one teacher.

Special Needs

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the potential impact of delegation of spending on the provision of support for children with special educational needs. [64059]

Ms Estelle Morris: The new arrangements for school funding continue to allow flexibility for spending to support children's special educational needs to be made by local education authorities or by school governing bodies as appropriate.

PFI Projects

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list his Department's approved

PFI projects together with the relevant local education authorities and the amount of finance involved in each case. [65112]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The schools PFI projects that have been approved so far by the Department and the Treasury chaired Project Review Group are as follows:

Individual School Projects and Local Education Authority

Colfox Secondary School; Dorset
new secondary school; Enfield
new secondary school; Essex
new secondary school; Hillingdon
Victoria Dock Primary School; Kingston upon Hull
Swanscombe Secondary School; Kent
Lillian Bayliss Secondary School; Lambeth
Fleetwood High School; Lancashire
Speke Forward Learning Centre; Liverpool
Cardinal Heenan Secondary School; Leeds
Temple Primary School; Manchester
new secondary school; Portsmouth
Mulberry School; Tower Hamlets
new secondary school; Waltham Forest
Pimlico School; Westminster

Grouped Schools Projects (Repair/Rebuild/Refurbishment schemes) and Local Education Authorities

10 schools; Birmingham
36 schools; Cornwall
6 schools; East Riding of Yorkshire
5 schools; East Sussex
10 schools; Haringey
7 schools; Leeds
4 schools; North Yorkshire
6 schools; Nottinghamshire
6 schools; Sheffield
2 schools; Staffordshire
126 schools; Stoke on Trent
schools rationalisation scheme; Tameside
2 schools; Torbay
47 schools; Tower Hamlets
3 schools; Wiltshire
9 schools; Wirral
104 schools (Information Technology project); Dudley
90 schools (catering project); Lewisham.

The majority of these projects are currently in, or about to enter, contractual negotiations with potential private sector partners. It would not, therefore, be appropriate at this stage to release details of the funding for individual projects. Individual local education authorities, however, may be prepared to release details of the funding that has been approved. The overall total funding to be provided by central Government through PFI credits for all of the above projects is £705 million. Three projects have completed negotiations and have signed contracts. PFI credits have been approved for these projects as follows:

Colfox Secondary School; Dorset—£15 million;
new secondary school; Hillingdon—£19 million; and
Victoria Dock Primary School; Kingston upon Hull—£2 million.

Age Discrimination

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent representations he has received on age discrimination. [64052]

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to discourage age discrimination; and if he will make a statement. [64051]

Mr. Andrew Smith: With key partners such as TUC, CBI and Age Concern, we have been developing a draft code of practice to promote age diversity in employment. It covers all aspects of employment, including recruitment, selection training, development, redundancy and retirement.

The most recent representations on age discrimination in employment have been on the subject of the draft Code which was published for wider consultation on 16 November 1998. We are pleased with the wide interest the draft prompted, with copies being distributed to individuals, businesses, interest groups representing older people and Trades Unions. The consultation came to an end on 8 January and we are currently analysing the responses and representations we have received. The full version of the Code will be launched in the Spring.

Digital Broadcasting

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what role his Department has in the tendering process for the provision of digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum; [65690]

(2) how many bids have been received in response to the tender for the provision of digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum; and from which companies; [65689]

(3) what advertising, subscription and sponsorship revenue sources will be permitted to the provider of digital broadcast services to support the GCSE curriculum; [65691]

(4) if he will place in the Library a copy of the tender document for the provision of digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum; [65686]

(5) which national curriculum subjects will be supported by a digitally broadcast education service; [65688]

(6) what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of establishing a digital broadcast service to support the GCSE curriculum in *(a)* year one, *(b)* year two and *(c)* year three of operation; [65684]

(7) what plans he has to encourage *(a)* schools, *(b)* individuals and *(c)* others to subscribe to a new digital broadcast channel to support the GCSE curriculum. [65693]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department for Education and Employment has invited companies with a broadcasting or transmission licence and experience in the provision of educational broadcast material to submit tenders on a competitive basis for the provision of specific digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum. These services will support GCSEs in English, mathematics, double award science, history and geography.

Bids are currently being considered and information relating to them is commercial in confidence. The precise cost and nature of the services, plans to promote them and permitted sources of revenue will depend on the outcome of the tender exercise and will form part of any contract. A copy of the Invitation to Tender for the digital broadcasting services is being deposited in the Library.

The Department has no plans for a new digital broadcast channel to support the GCSE curriculum. Decisions on such a channel, and on its possible funding, would be for individual broadcasters.

Competitive Bidding (Education Grants)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) for how many of the specific grants for education competitive bidding was required in *(a)* 1985, *(b)* 1992, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 1998; [65511]

(2) if he will list, for each annual programme of specific grants for education since 1992, whether the circulars issued were submitted for consultation. [65512]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of specific grants requiring competitive bidding by local education authorities was (a) 14 in 1985, (b) 15 in 1992, (c) 20 in 1997 and (d) 15 in 1998, representing bids for programmes starting the following financial year. Circulars covering specific grant programmes were submitted for consultation through local government organisations in 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1996.

Phono-graphics

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the phono-graphics method of teaching children to read, with particular reference to children with dyslexia. [65618]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU) has had discussions with the authors of the scheme, and remain in contact. The National Literacy Strategy enshrines many of the principles underpinning the scheme, including the importance of phonemic awareness for making progress in literacy. The strategy is a practical programme for raising standards in primary schools which aims to ensure that all children, including those with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, are taught to read and write well. All teachers are being trained in the most effective methods of teaching literacy, and schools are implementing a structured daily Literacy Hour.

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet Meetings

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list *(a)* the dates on which Cabinet meetings have taken place since 1 September 1998 and *(b)* which of those meetings were attended by (i) the Minister of Transport and (ii) the Minister for the Environment. [65517]

The Prime Minister: In accordance with longstanding practice, information about proceedings of the Cabinet is not made public. However, when the new Cabinet was announced in July 1998 it was made clear that, although not a member of the Cabinet, the Minister of Transport would be invited to attend its meetings.

Official Spokesman

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if the phrase used by his official spokesman on 21 December 1998 concerning the intellect of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) was used with his authority. [65680]

The Prime Minister: My Official Spokesman was questioning the argument that action against Saddam Hussein should be taken only if he were removed from power. It was, and is, my view that this argument is not valid.

WALES

Crickhowell House

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what, under the current arrangements made by the Welsh Office for the tenancy of Crickhowell House in Cardiff, are *(a)* the length of the lease and its final year, *(b)* the current rent and the provisions for review, *(c)* the repairing and other responsibilities of the lease and *(d)* the financial liability other than the rent at the commencement or termination of the lease. [65283]

Mr. Michael: *(a)* The Welsh Office entered into a 30 year lease starting in 1993.

(b) For reasons of commercial confidentiality, it is Government policy not to disclose information about rent levels for individual properties. There is provision for 5 yearly reviews on 29 September 2003, 29 September 2008, 29 September 2013 and 30 August 2018.

(c) It is a full repairing lease.

(d) The financial liability, other than rent, is for rates maintenance costs, and works to house the Assembly. At the termination of the lease, dilapidations and reinstatement of the building will fall due.

Objective I Status

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the *(a)* dates and *(b)* venues for public seminars on Objective I status for West Wales and the Valleys organised by his Department. [65414]

Mr. Hain: The European Task Force will be organising a series of public seminars across Wales to discuss the outline national development strategy it has prepared. The national development strategy will explicitly cover the needs of all of Wales—though clearly allowing for local variances—and the policy objectives for the Objective 1 development plan will emanate from it. The seminars will be held during March in the middle of the consultation period. Exact dates and locations will be announced shortly.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Broadcasting

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what plans his Department has to fund a digital broadcasting service to support the GCSE curriculum; [65685]

(2) what steps he has taken to inform digital television licence holders of his plans for a digital broadcast education service to support the GCSE curriculum; [65695]

(3) what advice he has received from commercial broadcasters as to the ability of a digitally broadcasting education service to be self-financing; [65687]

(4) if he will make a statement on the implications for BBC Education Services of the establishment of publicly funded digital broadcast service to support the GCSE curriculum. [65694]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

The Department for Education and Employment has invited companies with a broadcasting or transmission licence and experience in the provision of educational broadcast material to submit tenders on a competitive basis for the provision of specific digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum. These services will support GCSEs in English, mathematics, double award science, history and geography. Bids are currently being considered and information relating to them is commercial in confidence. The precise cost and nature of the services, plans to promote them and permitted sources of revenue will depend on the outcome of the tender exercise and will form part of any contract. A copy of the Invitation to Tender for the digital broadcasting services is being deposited in the Library.

The Department has no plans for a new digital broadcast channel to support the GCSE curriculum. Decisions on such a channel, and on its possible funding, would be for individual broadcasters.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Hurricane Mitch

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans the Government have to provide long-term aid for the reconstruction of Nicaragua and Honduras after the period of the current emergency aid. [65336]

Mr. Foulkes: We are looking at a number of ways of giving help to those affected by Hurricane Mitch, both in the short and long term.

During the immediate emergency phase, we provided funding for food, medicine and shelter through non-governmental organisations and four British ships did tremendous work during the relief effort, including rescuing people stranded in remote areas.

Following a Department for International Development (DFID) mission to the region in November, a further programme of assistance was announced which included rebuilding secondary roads and bridges, repairing water and sanitation infrastructure, restoring primary health and education services and work on epidemiological surveillance and epidemic control.

Our plans for help in the long term include a fund to strengthen the capacity of local organisations to enable them to make fuller use of loans provided by the Inter American Development Bank and a project aimed at regenerating crop production through provision of appropriate seed.

We are also currently investigating the possibility of working with the Pan American Health Organisation on health projects in the region, a programme of longer term support alongside the emergency road-building project announced in my statement of 4 December, a micro finance scheme, and support to a regional rural development and natural resources technical assistance unit (RUTA).

On debt, we are pleased that the World Bank has now approved a multilateral Trust Fund to help with the servicing of multilateral debts. The UK has pledged £10 million to this fund, and total pledges now stand at well over $100 million. When the Paris Club met at the beginning of December, they agreed a debt relief package worth over £100 million.

Inter University Council

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the Government's responsibilities to people recruited through the Inter University Council as regards pensions and superannuation. [65115]

Mr. Foulkes: The British Government are responsible for the payment supplements to pensions of only the specific former Inter University Council staff who qualify under the "Scheme for the Application of Supplementation and Pension Increases to FSSU Benefits of British Staff who retire from an IUC Associated University Overseas". The Scheme is administered by the British Council.

DEFENCE

Territorial Army

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons the unposted list for Territorial Army officers is to be discontinued. [62179]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

HMS Invincible

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons HMS Invincible has been deployed to the Gulf. [65378]

Mr. George Robertson: HMS Invincible together with HMS Newcastle and RFA Fort Austin have deployed to the Gulf to reinforce our capability to keep Saddam Hussein contained. In parallel to further diplomatic discussion this sends the clearest possible signal that we mean business.

Kuwait (Air Bases)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assurances he has received from the Government of Kuwait about the use of Kuwaiti air bases for future bombing missions against Iraq. [65377]

Mr. George Robertson: We have regular discussions with the Government of Kuwait on a wide range of issues surrounding the basing and activities of UK forces in Kuwait. The details of these discussions are confidential and I am withholding them under Section 1b (International Relations) of the code of practice on access to Government information.

Southern Watch

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with the Prime Minister of France about French participation in Southern Watch, based in Saudi Arabia; and if he will make a statement. [65374]

Mr. George Robertson: I have had no discussions with the Prime Minister of France but have spoken to the French Minister of Defence, Mr. Richard, on a wide range of issues of mutual concern, including Operation Southern Watch. French aircraft have not participated in Operation Southern Watch flights since missions resumed following Operation Desert Fox last month. We hope French aircraft will participate shortly.

Armed Forces (Ethics and Discipline)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he intends to publish a joint service guide to ethics and discipline for the armed forces. [65628]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No.

The armed services each issue a variety of guidelines which identify the conduct expected from their personnel and accommodate the differences between individual service environments. These guidelines, which are periodically reviewed, make it clear that high standards of behaviour are expected from individuals at all times.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason the Baghdad Museum of Natural History was hit by US and UK forces; and what is his assessment of the damage done. [65681]

Mr. George Robertson: The Baghdad Museum of Natural History was not targeted by US or UK forces during Operation Desert Fox. At most, it may have sustained light superficial damage from an attack on an Iraqi command and control facility located approximately half a mile away.

Mr. Tony Geraghty

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons the home of Mr. Tony Geraghty has been searched by MoD Police and his computer files and other material seized. [65472]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This is a matter for the Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency. I have asked the Chief Constable to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from W. E. E. Boreham to Mr. Tam Dalyell, dated 14 January 1999:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the house search and property seized by the Ministry of Defence Police from Tony Geraghty, as this falls into my area of responsibility as Chief Constable/Chief Executive of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency.

Computer files and research material were seized, under warrant, from the home address of Mr. Geraghty, as part of an investigation in connection with alleged offences against the Official Secrets Act. The property seized is currently under evaluation.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if Liberal Democrat members of the Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee received briefings on the green paper on pensions before its contents were disclosed to hon. Members. [64772]

Mr. Darling: After discussion with the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), I have discussed matters in relation to pensions with the Liberal Democrat pensions spokesman, the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). I am always prepared to discuss any aspect of my Department's policy with right hon. and hon. Members. I have held no discussion on pensions policy with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), nor have I attended the Joint Consultative Committee.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will break down into its constituent parts the £150 billion figure he has given for the privatisation of the state pension system; [65005]

(2) if he will break down into its constitution parts his £150 billion estimate for privatising current state pension provision. [65175]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The figure of £150 billion for the privatisation of the State Pension system is the cumulative Public Sector Borrowing Requirement cost to 2040 of introducing the previous Government's policy Basic Pension Plus. This sum represents the increased cost of National Insurance rebates (approximately £300 billion) less savings from changing the tax treatment of pensions (approximately £150 billion).

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has for the structure and level of national insurance rebates for those who take out stakeholder pensions. [65580]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) on 11 January 1999, *Official Report,* column *66.*

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to paragraph 21, page 4, of "Partnership in Pensions", Cm 4179, what is the basis for the statement

that the minimum income guarantee provides a minimum income in retirement without the stigma some people associate with income support. [65594]

Mr. Timms: We have completed research into why some pensioners do not claim their benefit entitlements and pilots into the best ways of encouraging them to do so. We are using the results to develop a strategy to overcome the barriers to claiming, including the problem of stigma. For example, we propose to run a publicity campaign in 1999 which will emphasise that the minimum income guarantee is an entitlement, not a hand out.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many local authorities have taken up the Government's offer of computer terminals to provide access to "Benefits Agency data", set out in the Green Paper, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business", paragraph 8.5. [65451]

Mr. Timms: Of the 409 Local Authorities (LAs) approached, 355 (87 per cent.) have applied for installation of a remote access computer terminal (RAT) and we are currently installing them; by the end of December 1998 some 120 LAs were operating RATs and we are aiming to install the balance by the end of March this year.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans the Government have to replace the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team with a new anti-fraud body. [65445]

Mr. Timms: We are carrying out a review of how organised fraud within Social Security benefits, including fraud in those benefits that are primarily administered by local authorities, can be countered.

The Government are pursuing this within the anti-fraud strategy announced earlier this year in the Green Paper, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business: Securing the Future".

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the code of practice for data-matching between different agencies, mentioned in the Green Paper, Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business, paragraph 5.2.7 was published. [65449]

Mr. Timms: The code of practice was published on 12 October 1998.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many reports have been completed by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate; how many have been submitted to ministers; and how many have been published. [65450]

Mr. Timms: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) have completed eight reports. Of these, five have been submitted to Ministers and published. The remaining three completed reports are to be submitted to Ministers and published shortly.

We expect to receive and publish 12 more BFI reports by the end of March 1999.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress made so far on implementation of the personal details computer system for the Benefits Agency. [65452]

Mr. Timms: The Personal Details Computer System (PDCS) will provide the Department with a consistent set of customer personal details for use by all benefit systems. This will improve the accounting and security of benefit expenditure.

All personal details formerly held on the individual Child Benefit and Income Support computer systems, and all personal details from new claims to these benefits, are already being maintained on the PDCS. Additionally, new personal details for Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) and benefits maintained on the pensions computer system (including Retirement Pensions, Incapacity Benefit, Widows Benefit and Maternity Allowance) are being entered directly onto the PDCS.

Presently there are 11.8 million customer records on PDCS. This number will rise to 23.6 million during 1999 following the transfer of existing JSA and pensions computer system records.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many local authorities have implemented the new verification framework to protect against housing benefit fraud; and how many authorities he expects to implement it in the near future. [65453]

Mr. Timms: In 1998–99 funds were made available to help 85 local authorities to implement the verification framework. On 23 December 1998, we announced that extra funding was available to enable all local authorities to implement the framework over the coming year. £100 million extra will be made available to run the framework over the next three years.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many benefit fraudsters have been punished to date by administrative penalties; and how many have been given formal cautions. [65444]

Mr. Timms: Of those offered by the Benefits Agency, 599 administrative financial penalties, and 544 cautions have been accepted. Such information is not collected centrally for local authorities.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what progress has been made on the creation of a comprehensive performance measurement framework for fraud and anti-fraud activity; [65441]

(2) if he will make a statement on the results of the Benefits Agency trials of new performance indicators to measure anti-fraud activity; [65442]

(3) what progress has been made on the development of a national framework for the use of sanctions by agencies involved in social security administration; and when the Government plans to publish the framework; [65443]

(4) what the results have been of the Government's exploration of risk-management techniques to analyse benefit processing in order to shape anti-fraud policies; [65454]

(5) what recent changes have been made to the rules governing replacement of lost Giro cheques; [65446]

(6) when the Government plans to repeat the research aimed at benchmarking public attitudes to benefit fraud, as set out in the Green Paper, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business", paragraph 4.18; [65458]

(7) if the development of common core skills and training for fraud investigators has been completed; and when the Government plans to implement the further principles of good practice and continuous learning and development for investigators set out in "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business", paragraphs 7.6 and 8.4–5; [65460]

(8) if he will make a statement on the measures taken to strengthen the vetting procedures for staff involved in issuing national insurance numbers; [65462]

(9) what steps have been taken to implement methods of cross-checking records within the National Insurance Recording System; and whether the delays in respect of NIRS2 have affected the timetable for implementation; [65464]

(10) if the Government have come to a conclusion on the value of investing in a national intelligence system to counter serious fraud; [65447]

(11) what conclusions the Government have reached as a result of its review of data protection legislation, mentioned in the Green Paper, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business", paragraph 5.2.7; and what further possibilities for data-matching beyond his Department have been identified; [65448]

(12) when the Government plans to publish the results of its review of the most commonly broken benefit rules, mentioned in the Green Paper, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business", paragraph 5.1.8; [65455]

(13) what progress has been made towards developing a public communication strategy for fraud and welfare reform; [65457]

(14) what conclusions have been reached by the Government in its review of benefit funding arrangements with regard to security against fraud; [65459]

(15) what new steps the Government intends to take to combat landlord housing benefit fraud; and what research it is undertaking or plans to undertake into this problem. [65463]

Mr. Timms: We will publish shortly, our strategy for combating Social Security fraud in the light of the consultation on the Green Paper "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business: Securing the Future".

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of debt owed by fraudsters to his Department is currently being recovered; what is the average length of time between successful prosecution and recovery of debt; and what the equivalent figures were for each of the previous five years. [65439]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. A new Debt Accounting and Management system to improve management, control and accounting of debt is being designed and developed during 1999.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what dates the ministerial group established to oversee anti-fraud strategy, announced in the Green Paper, "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business", has met. [65461]

Mr. Timms: "Questions of Procedures for Ministers" makes it clear that information relating to the proceedings of Cabinet or Cabinet Committees is not normally made public, in order to protect the principle of collective responsibility.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many asylum seekers have been found guilty of benefit fraud in the last three years [65471]

Mr. Timms: The information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the cost of benefit payments to asylum seekers in the last three years. [65466]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Asylum seekers—estimated Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit annual expenditure

£ million

Year	*Total estimated annual expenditure*
1995–96	300
1996–97	310
1997–98	325

Notes:

1. Information on other non-contributory benefits is not available.
2. Estimated annual expenditure figures are rounded to the nearest five million pounds. Figures may not sum due to rounding.
3. Estimates for February 1997 onwards will include a number of non-asylum seekers who receive Urgent Case Payments for other reasons.
4. Annual expenditure figures for Income Support have been based on an average of four quarters for the relevant financial year, using number of cases and average weekly amounts.
5. Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit estimates have been calculated using the Housing Benefit Management 1 per cent. sample and Departmental Reports, and exclude asylum seekers receiving Housing Benefit who are not receiving Income Support.

Source:

1. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1995 to May 1997.
2. Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample of claimants in receipt of Income Support, at the end of May in each year given.
3. Departmental Report.

Unemployment Benefit Costs

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the average net cost to public funds of the social security payments made to each unemployed person included in the monthly claimant count for the latest year for which figures are available. [65648]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Main benefits received by claimants of unemployment-related Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)

	Total Caseload	*Average amount £ per week*		
		JSA	*HB*	*CTB*
All unemployed claimants	1,562,000	50.02	21.98	4.00
Contribution based JSA	181,000	46.11	7.91	1.52
Income based JSA	1,225,000	56.98	26.81	4.86

Main benefits received by claimants of unemployment-related Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)

	Total Caseload	Average amount £ per week JSA	HB	CTB
No entitlement to JSA (Receiving National Insurance Credits only)	156,000	0.00	0.39	0.09

Notes:

1. JSA, Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are the benefits most likely to be received by a person claiming benefit on the grounds of unemployment. The expenditure figures shown represent the estimated average benefit payment made to claimants of unemployment-related benefit at a single week in May 1997. This is the latest date for which information on all of the benefits concerned is available.
2. Figures relate to Great Britain.
3. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.
4. JSA claimants can receive either contribution-based JSA or income-based JSA, but cannot receive both.

Source:

1. JSA Statistics Quarterly Enquiry May 1997 (5 per cent. sample).
2. Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample enquiries with and without Income Support/JSA (Income Based), taken at the end of May 1997.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Young Offenders

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's policy as to the separation between juveniles and young adults who have been remanded in custody or sentenced to a period of detention. [65286]

Mr. George Howarth: Prison Service policy on the separation of male prisoners is set out in Instruction to Governors 48/1995, a copy of which is in the Library. The Prison Service is currently finalising, in consultation with the Youth Justice Board, the proposals for a new distinct estate for boys aged 15 to 17-years-old, remanded or sentenced to custody, which will better meet their needs.

Girls aged between 15 and 20 sentenced to custody should be held in young offender accommodation, unless a direction under section 1C of the Criminal Justice Act 1982, as amended by the Criminal Justice Act 1988, has been made. 15 and 16-year-old girls are remanded to the care of the local authority; section 43(2)(c) of the Prison Act 1952 requires that 17-year-olds who are remanded in custody are held in prison accommodation.

An assessment is also underway of the needs of girls under 18-years-old.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* boys and *(b)* girls up to the age of 16 are at present serving sentences in prisons in England and Wales. [65287]

Mr. George Howarth: The currently available information relates to the population on the last day of November 1998 and is given in the table.

Population of 15 and 16 year olds under sentence in prisons in England and Wales on 30 November 1998 [1] by sex

Age	Number Males	Females
15	162	6
16	488	24

[1] Provisional figures

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants who arrived at Dover Ferry Port have been granted political asylum in each of the last 12 months. [64752]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information on the numbers of persons granted asylum in the 12 months from 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998 who had been issued with notice of illegal entry by immigration officials at Dover is given in the table.

Persons granted asylum in the period 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998 who had been issued with notice of illegal entry by immigration officials at Dover

Date	Number of persons
July 1997	0
August 1997	[1]—
September 1997	[1]—
October 1997	[1]—
November 1997	[1]—
December 1997	[1]—
January 1998	[1]—
February 1998	[1]—
March 1998	3
April 1998	0
May 1998	[1]—
June 1998	6

[1] Represents 1 or 2

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants are currently being detained who arrived at Plymouth Ferry Port; and what were the equivalent figures for each of the last six months. [64756]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is that, as at 7 January 1999, no more than two persons who had been served with a notice of illegal entry by immigration officials at Plymouth were detained solely under immigration Act powers. Information relating to the previous six months could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants who arrived at Poole Ferry Port have been refused entry and removed from the UK within seven days of arrival in each of the last 12 months. [64751]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information on the numbers of persons removed or departing voluntarily within seven days of being issued with a notice of illegal entry by immigration officials at Poole, between 1 July 1997 and 30 June 1998 is given in the table.

Persons removed or departing voluntarily within 7 days of being issued with a notice of illegal entry by immigration officials at Poole, 1 July 1997 and to 30 June 1998

	Number of persons
July 1997	[1]—
August 1997	0
September 1997	0
October 1997	4
November 1997	[1]—
December 1997	0
January 1998	0
February 1998	0
March 1998	0
April 1998	0
May 1998	0
June 1998	0

[1] represents 1 or 2

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of the former Yugoslavia are currently being detained in the UK as illegal immigrants; and what the figures were in each of the last three years. [65297]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write to the hon. Member.

Michael Menson

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made by the Police Complaints Authority in its investigation of the police inquiry into the murder of Michael Menson in January 1997; and when the report is expected to be completed. [65067]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police informs me that Michael Menson's family, the Metropolitan Police and the Police Complaints Authority have all agreed that the death of Michael Menson should be reinvestigated.

This reinvestigation is being carried out by Deputy Assistant Commissioner (DAC) John Grieve, who heads the Metropolitan Police Racial and Violent Crime Task Force. This investigation will not be subject to Police Complaints Authority supervision, but there will be lay involvement and very close liaison with the family.

The formal complaint, made by Michael Menson's family, about the initial investigation made by the Metropolitan Police, is still pending. All concerned understand that the family will be given the opportunity to pursue their complaint once DAC Grieve has completed his reinvestigation.

All parties have agreed that it would not be appropriate to conduct a complaints investigation alongside the reinvestigation.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints were made about the service at IND in 1998. [65168]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: 478 complaints were received during 1998 under the formal arrangements for handling complaints against members of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate staff. There is no central record of other complaints, for example, about delays or the merits of individual decisions.

Visas (Students)

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimates he has made of the number of foreign language students visiting the UK who outstay the residence rights under the terms of their visas; and what investigations he has made of this matter. [65279]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that the information requested is not available. It is not possible to produce estimates of students overstaying as no recordings of passengers leaving the United Kingdom is undertaken. The statistics available on deportation action against overstayers do not show the category under which the person was admitted to this country.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of Slovakia have sought political asylum in the UK in the last three months; how many applications have been accepted; and what were the figures in each of the last three years. [65263]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is given in the table.

Applications[1] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependents, and initial decisions on applications, September to November 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 for nationals of Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.

	Total applications	Total decisions	Grants of asylum	Grants of ELR	Total refusals
1995					
Slovakia	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1996					
Slovakia	15	35	—	—	35
1997[2]					
Slovakia	160	205	—	—	205
1998[2]					
Slovakia	380	210	—	—	210

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5

[2] Provisional figures

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of *(a)* Bulgaria and *(b)* the Czech Republic have sought political asylum in the UK in the last three months; how many applications have been accepted; and what were the equivalent figures for each of the last three years. [64754]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is given in the table.

Applications[1] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions on applications, September to November 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 for nationals of Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.

	Total applications	Total decisions	Grants of asylum	Grants of ELR	Total refusals
1995					
Bulgaria	145	15	—	—	15
Czech Republic	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Applications[1] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions on applications, September to November 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 for nationals of Bulgaria and the Czech Republic

	Total applications	*Total decisions*	*Grants of asylum*	*Grants of ELR*	*Total refusals*
1996					
Bulgaria	75	115	*	—	115
Czech Republic	15	15	—	—	15
1997[2]					
Bulgaria	135	175	—	—	175
Czech Republic	120	85	—	—	85
1998[2]					
Bulgaria	25	35	—	*	35
Czech Republic	230	75	—	—	75

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5, with '*' = 1 or 2.

[2] Provisional figures.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning the accommodation of medically-qualified asylum seekers as regards *(a)* the adequacy of the accommodation and *(b)* its proximity to institutions where they could use their qualifications or requalify. [65595]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There is no central record of the representations received from medically qualified asylum seekers.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultation he *(a)* has carried out and *(b)* plans to carry out with (i) local authorities and (ii) other relevant bodies regarding his proposals for a new support scheme for asylum seekers. [65565]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Consultation with local authorities and other relevant bodies regarding the proposals for the new support scheme has been carried out principally in the following ways:

(a) through the White Paper: "Fairer, faster and firmer—a modern approach to immigration and asylum";

(b) through the formation of a stakeholder group which contains representatives from local authorities, housing associations and the voluntary sector and who have been consulted extensively on a wide range of issues associated with the support proposals;

(c) through consultation on a "process manual" setting out the way in which the support scheme is intended to operate and which I hope to publish shortly;

(d) through ad hoc meetings between the relevant bodies and the asylum seekers support project team which has been set up to carry forward the proposals in the White Paper.

In addition the Asylum Seekers Support Project Team includes the seconded deputy chief executive of the Refugee Council and two seconded officers from local authorities.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what basis transitional funding relief to local authorities for asylum seekers will be allocated for *(a)* passported refugees, *(b)* asylum seekers who declared their intention at the port of entry and *(c)* other asylum seekers. [65573]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Asylum seekers who declare their applications at their ports of entry may be eligible for income support and housing benefit. Other asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute may be eligible for support from local authority social services departments under the terms of the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Children Act 1989. In these circumstances, it is the Government's intention to reimburse local authorities in this financial year on the basis of a maximum unit cost provision of £165 per week for single adults; £230 per week for families (£240 per week for families in Inner London), £400 per week for unaccompanied children aged 15 or under; and £200 per week for unaccompanied children aged 16 and 17. Those asylum seekers who are subsequently recognised as refugees may also qualify for income support and housing benefit.

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers have been found to be requiring NHS treatment on arrival in the United Kingdom in the past three years. [65468]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is not available to the Home Office.

Medway Secure Training Centre

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the report of the Inspection of Medway Secure Training Centre will be published; and if he will make a statement. [66319]

Mr. Boateng: The report has been published by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) today, and copies of the report have been put in the Library. The report identifies shortcomings in the management of the Secure Training Centre (STC), and makes 32 key recommendations for improving the standard of service being provided by the contractor. All the recommendations have been accepted, and Rebound are taking urgent action to implement these recommendations. The Home Office will be monitoring progress in conjunction with SSI.

The report made a number of recommendations which required immediate action to strengthen management at the centre, and to improve operational procedures and monitoring. The Director at Medway has been working closely with SSI to implement these recommendations, and to introduce more effective strategies for dealing with difficult young people. A stronger management structure has been put in place to support the staff who were praised in the report for their enthusiasm and commitment. More staff are being recruited, and a programme of repair work has been completed.

The Government remain committed to the public/private partnership approach, and to making a positive difference to the lives of persistent young offenders, who despite repeated efforts by the Youth Justice system continue to offend. STCs are a new and challenging initiative, and Medway as the first centre of its kind has had a difficult beginning, but action is now being taken to introduce the positive regime we require. I will be monitoring closely the position at Medway, and a further inspection will be undertaken by SSI later this year.

Mortgage Fraud

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals imprisoned following conviction on charges of false accounting, *(b)* the average sentence and *(c)* the longest sentence; [65606]

(2) if he will list for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals imprisoned following conviction on charges of obtaining property by deception in cases of mortgage fraud, *(b)* the average sentence and *(c)* the longest sentence; [65602]

(3) if he will list for each of the last five years the number of offenders convicted of offences of obtaining property by deception involving mortgage fraud sentenced to community service; [65605]

(4) if he will list for each of the last five years the number of offenders convicted on charges of false accounting sentenced to community service; [65604]

(5) if he will list for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals imprisoned following conviction on charges of false accounting in cases of mortgage fraud, *(b)* the average sentence and *(c)* the longest sentence; [65603]

(6) if he will list for each of the last five years the number of individuals convicted of offences of false accounting involving mortgage fraud sentenced to community service; [65599]

(7) if he will list for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals fined following conviction on charges of obtaining property by deception in cases of mortgage fraud, *(b)* the average fine and *(c)* the highest fine; [65600]

(8) if he will list for each of the last five years the number of offenders convicted on charges of obtaining property by deception sentenced to community service; [65601]

(9) how many prosecutions were brought for false accounting in each of the last five years; and how many of these related to instances of mortgage fraud; [65612]

(10) if he will list for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals fined following conviction on charges of false accounting, *(b)* the average fine and *(c)* the highest fine; [65613]

(11) how many individuals were convicted of false accounting in each of the last five years; and how many of these related to instances of mortgage fraud; [65610]

(12) how many individuals were convicted of obtaining property by deception in each of the last five years; and how many of these related to instances of mortgage fraud; [65611]

(13) if he will list, for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals fined following conviction on charges of false accounting in cases of mortgage fraud, *(b)* the average fine and *(c)* the highest fine; [65614]

(14) if he will list for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals imprisoned following conviction on charges of obtaining property by deception, *(b)* the average sentence and *(c)* the longest sentence; [65607]

(15) how many prosecutions were brought for obtaining property by deception in each of the last five years; and how many of these related to instances of mortgage fraud; [65609]

(16) if he will list for each of the last five years *(a)* the number of individuals fined following conviction on charges of obtaining property by deception, *(b)* the average fine and *(c)* the highest fine. [65608]

Mr. Boateng: The table shows court proceedings data for offences of false accounting and obtaining property by deception from 1993 to 1997.

Our records do not distinguish the circumstances (i.e. mortgage fraud) of these types of fraud offences.

Number of persons prosecuted at magistrates' courts and convicted at all courts for certain fraud offences by result, 1993–97, England and Wales

Offence description and court proceedings	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
False accounting					
Prosecutions	502	620	550	800	1,095
Convictions	438	449	475	700	1,109
of which given a Fine	66	71	57	84	83
Average fine (£)	483	605	536	379	564
Highest fine recorded (£)	11,000	20,000	15,000	5,000	5,000
Community service order	134	142	133	196	356
Immediate custody	71	90	122	187	301
Average sentence length (months)	14.2	11.0	11.6	12	11.4
Longest sentence length recorded (months)	84	36	48	60	60
Obtaining property by deception					
Prosecutions	15,096	17,040	15,141	14,330	14,388
Convictions	11,461	12,072	10,785	10,178	9,978
of which given a Fine	2,639	2,407	1,909	1,624	1,579
Average fine (£)	137	206	175	154	152
Highest fine recorded (£)	5,000	3,000	7,500	8,500	5,000
Community service order	1,958	2,047	1,959	1,718	1,645
Immediate custody	1,483	1,702	1,823	1,774	1,757
Average sentence length (months)	10.2	9.8	8.8	9.0	8.1
Longest sentence length recorded (months)	96	102	84	96	84

Note:

Convictions may be higher than prosecutions because person may have been proceeded against in earlier years or for other offences.

Impeachment

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the future use of impeachment. [65774]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None.

TREASURY

Funerals

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the consultation document on pre-payments for funerals is to be published. [66317]

Ms Hewitt: The consultation document entitled "Regulation of Pre-paid Funeral Plans" is published today. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

In my announcement of 29 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *300*, I said that the Government would be looking at ways of excluding from direct regulation under the Financial Services and Markets Bill pre-paid funeral arrangements that offer sufficient protection to consumers. The consultation document explores how to meet that objective without the need for regulation by the Financial Services Authority. It discusses two possible exemptions: plans backed by a life insurance policy (either whole of life or investment-backed); and where a provider has set up a trust arrangement which has sufficient safeguards.

The proposals apply to new plans, but the document asks for views on how existing plans could be enhanced to provide the types of safeguard set out in the document.

Responses should be sent by 30 April to Mrs. Raminder Sandhu, Financial Services Team, HM Treasury, Room 111/G, Parliament Street, London SW1P 3AG.

Pensions Mis-selling

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress in the review of personal pensions mis-selling. [66318]

Ms Hewitt: Significant progress has been achieved in the priority review since May 1997. The major firms monitored by the Treasury have advanced from 15 per cent. to 94 per cent. of priority case reviews completed since the Government took office.

Of the 21 firms whose results are set out only one has resolved less than 75 per cent. of its cases. Seventeen have now resolved over 90 per cent. of their cases.

The time limit for completion of the priority review, set by the Personal Investment Authority (PIA), has now expired for the last 19 firms. As of 31 December *all* firms should have completed the priority review. Consistent with the treatment of the twenty firms already removed from the Treasury's monthly list the Government will look to the PIA for its assessment of whether the remainder have in fact met their targets. Those that have will be removed from the list next month.

Firms must now concentrate their efforts onto phase 2 of the review. It is important that the lessons of the priority review are properly learnt. The Government and the regulators will no longer tolerate delay, and expect all firms to adhere to the regulators' timetable.

Progress by pensions firms in resolving cases of personal pensions mis-selling in the period to the end of December 1998

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
50–75 per cent. of cases resolved								
Countrywide	5,476	2,987	717	249	468	353	6	66
Over 75 per cent. of cases resolved								
DBS	2,475	953	1,138	269	869	726	29	79
IFA Network	368	134	166	99	67	62	17	80
Burns Anderson	1,298	440	760	275	485	426	33	88
Financial Options	573	407	121	35	86	75	13	90
Sedgwick	17,225	10,037	6,025	1,976	4,049	3,742	22	91
Windsor Life	9,711	4,245	5,331	333	4,998	4,393	45	92
Sun Life of Canada	29,146	11,454	17,043	2,935	14,108	12,586	43	93
Colonial	8,734	3,192	5,395	625	4,770	4,306	49	93
Lincoln National	13,604	2,258	11,106	1,419	9,687	9,066	67	94
Standard Life	7,571	923	6,396	1,327	5,069	4,887	65	94
Hill Samuel	6,118	943	5,043	719	4,324	4,153	68	95
Abbey Life	18,132	6,759	10,825	1,398	9,427	9,112	50	95
Pearl	48,500	4,855	42,860	5,838	37,022	35,590	73	95
CIS	44,681	8,060	36,606	13,984	22,622	20,622	46	95
Friends Provident	7,152	1,362	5,643	847	4,796	4,632	65	96
London and Manchester	8,641	1,619	6,992	703	6,289	6,069	70	97
Berkeley Independent	185	122	63	36	27	22	12	97
Equitable Life	7,628	1,972	5,591	1,831	3,760	3,620	47	97
Hogg Robinson	2,338	871	1,467	487	980	934	40	98
Legal & General	37,355	15,301	21,869	2,075	19,794	19,256	52	98

A: cases identified as requiring review
B: of A, cases where investor was informed that information gained during assessment excluded cases from review
C: number of assessments completed
D: cases where the investor has been informed that no redress is due
E: cases where redress has been offered
F: cases where redress has been accepted
G: cases where redress has been accepted as a percentage of cases identified for review ((F/A)x100)
H: cases completed, including exclusions, as a percentage of cases identified for review (((B+D+F)/A)x100)

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what arrangements are in place to ensure that phase 2 of the personal pensions mis-selling review will complete its outstanding cases within the timescales set out in the review; and if he will make a statement. [65062]

Ms Hewitt: The Financial Services Authority's guidance for phase 2 will include appropriate timescales for completion of the review. FSA will monitor the performance of firms to see that this guidance is adhered to. The regulators have made clear that disciplinary action will continue to be taken against firms that do not conduct their reviews with a sufficient degree of despatch.

Developing Countries (Debt)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for *(a)* Uganda, *(b)* Mozambique, *(c)* Bolivia, *(d)* Guyana, *(e)* Cote d'Ivoire and *(f)* Burkina Faso the (i) actual debt service in the five years prior to completion point in the HIPC Initiative and (ii) IMF/World Bank estimates of actual debt service for the five years after completion point. [61490]

Ms Hewitt: The precise information requested is not available. I am, however, writing to my hon. Friend and will place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Higher Rate Taxpayers

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many individuals paid income tax at the higher rate, and, of these, how many filed an income tax return, in the latest year for which figures are available. [64684]

Dawn Primarolo: About 2.0 million taxpayers have paid tax at the higher rate for the 1996–97 tax year. The information available on taxpayers who have filed 1996–97 tax returns to date does not allow the number who have paid higher rate tax to be separately identified. However, the vast majority of higher rate payers will have filed a tax return.

European Code of Conduct Group

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what *(a)* prior and *(b)* continuing consultation he has had with the Government of Gibraltar in respect of discussions on taxation in the European Union Code of Conduct Group. [64475]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* Discussions on the EU Code of Conduct were held at ministerial level with Government of Gibraltar representatives before the Code of Conduct was agreed on 1 December 1997. Since then the UK Government have kept the Government of Gibraltar informed of significant developments in the Code of Conduct exercise. Gibraltarian officials attended a seminar in September 1998 to discuss the Code and other initiatives to tackle harmful tax competitions. A meeting took place in October 1998 between the Chief Minister and other Government of Gibraltar representatives and senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Treasury and Inland Revenue officials to discuss these issues.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what link the Government have made between consideration of future tax regimes in Gibraltar and voting rights for citizens of Gibraltar in European parliamentary elections, as part of the discussions in the European Union Code of Conduct Group. [64476]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* These are two separate and distinct issues. The EU Code of Conduct tackles the specific problem of harmful tax competition. It is only right that Gibraltar should be part of international efforts to ensure fair tax competition and Gibraltar is part of the Community for these purposes. With reference to the issue of voting rights for citizens of Gibraltar in European Parliamentary elections, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the then Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), on 9 December 1997, *Official Report*, column *499*, to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson).

VAT

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on *(a)* the legislative base for, *(b)* the extent of and *(c)* the duration of (i) full, (ii) temporary and (iii) transitional exemptions in respect of VAT. [64824]

Dawn Primarolo: The legislative base for VAT exemptions and zero rates, in terms of EC law, is the Sixth VAT Directive.

Most of the UK's VAT exemptions, such as finance, insurance, most leasing of property and betting and gaming, are part of the normal VAT system, and there is no expiry date set down in the Sixth Directive. The same is true of the zero rate for exports outside the European Community, and associated supplies.

Under the so-called 'transitional' arrangements of the Sixth VAT Directive, the UK is also able to:

zero rate social items such as food, public transport, books, newspapers and children's clothing (Article 28(2)(a) of the Directive); and

exempt certain transactions, the main categories being burials, cremations, and building land (Article 28 (3)(b) of the Sixth VAT Directive).

In addition, there are a number of technical zero rates on goods dispatched (exported) from the UK to other EC member states.

It was originally envisaged that the transitional arrangements would last until 31 December 1996, when they would be replaced by a 'definitive' (Common) VAT system. However, the Commission has not yet put forward legislative proposals for key elements of the replacement Common VAT system. Until they do so, and they are unanimously agreed by member states, the transitional arrangements will continue automatically.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list, for the latest available year, the revenue obtained from VAT charges on *(a)* building alterations and *(b)* civil construction; and when VAT was introduced for each. [64809]

Dawn Primarolo: Information in the form requested is not available. However the breakdown of VAT receipts relating to buildings and construction can be provided.

Revenue in 1997–98 from house repairs, improvements and maintenance is estimated to be £1.5 billion and that on all other building work, apart from that which qualifies for zero-rating, to be £1.1 billion.

VAT was introduced for building alterations in 1984 and for construction of new commercial buildings in 1989.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the European Commission *(a)* gave notice of and *(b)* commenced, infraction proceedings against Her Majesty's Government concerning the zero rating, or exemption from VAT of (i) building alterations and (ii) construction works; on what legal instrument such actions were based; and what papers relating to such proceedings have been made publicly available. [64810]

Dawn Primarolo: The European Commission gave notice of infraction proceedings by the issue of a reasoned opinion to the UK Government on 4 September 1984. On 13 September 1985 the European Commission made an application to the European Court of Justice, pursuant to Article 169 of the EEC Treaty (as the Treaty was then known), alleging that the UK had breached Article 28(2) of the Sixth Directive. (Article 28(2) provides for the continuation of those zero rates which satisfy the conditions contained in the Second Council Directive of 1967.)

A copy of the report for the hearing of the case (416/85) before the European Court of Justice on 15 September 1987 was placed in the Library of the House of Commons on 23 July 1987. The opinion of the Judge Advocate (2 December 1987) and the judgment of the Court (21 June 1988) were published in European Court Reports, the formal law reports of the European Court of Justice.

New VAT law was introduced in the Finance Act 1989 to reflect the judgment of the European Court of Justice. The construction of commercial buildings became standard rated but dwellings and residential buildings continued to benefit from zero-rating.

The infraction proceedings did not apply to alterations to existing buildings which have been standard rated since 1984.

Lead-free Petrol

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the taxation of lead-free petrol following the phasing out of four star petrol. [64840]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor has received a number of representations about the taxation of lead-free petrol following the phasing out of four star petrol. All of the representations will be carefully considered in the run up to the next Budget.

British Drugs Liaison Officer (Pakistan)

Mr. Singh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what happened to the senior British Drugs Liaison Officer who was detained in Peshawar, Pakistan, after being caught with three kilograms of heroin in his possession in his official vehicle in July 1995. [65075]

Dawn Primarolo: No such incident took place.

Single Wage Earner Families

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures Her Majesty's Government are taking through the benefits system to support two-parent families with only one wage earner; and if he will make a statement. [63190]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The Secretary of State for Social Security announced a number of measures in his statement on 28 October 1998 including the largest ever increase in Child Benefit. And the under-11 child premium in Family Credit was increased from November last year—a change which will follow through into the Working Families Tax Credit when it replaces Family Credit from October 1999. The WFTC will be part of the tax system, and because it will begin to be paid through the pay packet from April 2000, it will reinforce the message that "work pays". The WFTC will help make work pay for families on low and middle incomes, around 400,000 more than are currently helped by Family Credit. Many of these families will be couples with only one income, where one parent chooses to stay at home with the children.

Blind Persons's Tax Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans his Department has to ensure that the audio and Braille versions of the leaflet IR121 "Income Tax and Pensioners" is amended to include a reference to the blind person's tax allowance. [64758]

Dawn Primarolo: I am grateful to the hon. Member for highlighting this omission from the audio and Braille versions of the leaflet IR121, "Income Tax and Pensioners". Both I and the Inland Revenue apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused. The Inland Revenue updates all its leaflets periodically, and will ensure that a reference to the blind person's allowance is included in the audio and Braille versions of leaflet IR121 when they are next revised.

Diesel Duty

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what pressure he is applying to bring duty levels on diesel in other EU countries up to the level currently applicable within the United Kingdom. [64985]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 12 January 1999]:* The Government continue to press for increases in the EU minimum rates for road fuels to reduce the price differentials between Member States and fully support the adoption of higher minimum diesel duty rates as part of the proposed Energy Products Directive.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact on the UK road haulage industry of the differences in rates of duty on diesel between EU states. [65027]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 12 January 1999]:* I have made no assessment of the impact on the UK road haulage industry of the difference in rates of duty between EU states. However, when considering the impact of taxation on the industry it is necessary to take account of the overall taxation burden, which is lower in the UK than that of our major EU competitors.

Mr. Charles Whelan

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the reasons for the planned departure of his Press Secretary, Mr. Charles Whelan; and what is Mr. Whelan's expected date of departure from the Treasury. [65700]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when he expects his Special Adviser, Mr. Charlie Whelan, to resign; [65515]

(2) if he will set out the severance pay arrangements for his Special Adviser, Mr. Charlie Whelan; [65518]

(3) what safeguards he is putting in place to ensure that his Special Adviser, Mr. Charlie Whelan, will not be able to make use of his knowledge of confidential policy matters when he takes up new employment; [65513]

(4) if his Special Adviser, Mr. Charlie Whelan, has access to confidential Budget policy papers. [65514]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The normal rules applying to those leaving the Civil Service will apply to Mr. Whelan, who has resigned from his post.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will answer the letter dated 5 October 1998 from the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) addressed to the last Paymaster General about the additional cost to the taxpayer of the funding method chosen for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. [65620]

Mr. Milburn: I have done so today.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Document Storage

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his Department's premises are being used to store documents removed from the Government Whips Office in July 1998; and if he will make a statement. [64551]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The only documents removed from the Government Whips Office in July 1998 were personal. Some of those documents are stored in the Department.

Computer Equipment (Government Chief Whip's Office)

Mr. Page: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food under what authority a payment was made by his Department to the Government Chief Whip's Office; and what the reasons were for the payment. [64321]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* My Special Advisers brought two laptop computers with them from the Whips' Office when they moved across to MAFF on 27 July. In accordance with normal practice, the Chief Whip's Office billed MAFF for the transfer of the equipment.

Mr. Page: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what payment has been made by his Department to the Government Chief Whip's Office; and what was the sum involved. [64320]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* A total payment of £11,207.23, including VAT, has been made by my Department to the Government Chief Whip's Office for the transfer of two laptop computers.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* civil servants, *(c)* advisers and *(d)* others were responsible for moving the computer equipment to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, from the Government Whips Office in July 1998; on what day the equipment arrived at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; and if he will make a statement. [64548]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* My Special Advisers brought their laptops with them on the day they joined me at MAFF on 27 July 1998.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which members of his Department have been assigned the computer equipment which was transferred to his Department from the Government Whips Office in July 1998; and if he will make a statement. [64550]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* My Special Advisers have retained the use of the two laptop computers they brought with them from the Government Whips Office in July.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the computer equipment transferred from the Government Whips Office to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in July 1998; and if he will estimate the *(a)* purchase cost and *(b)* current market value of the equipment. [64544]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* Two Toshiba Tecra 730X laptop computers, including CD ROM Drives, 48Mb RAM memory cards, PC modem cards, internet/modem and power leads, together with their carry cases transferred across from the Government Whips Office to MAFF with my Special Advisers in July. The original purchase cost of this equipment was £8,431.78. This figure is inclusive of VAT but does not include software installation costs. The estimated current market value of the equipment would be around £6,400.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) which *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials in his Department authorised the transfer of computer equipment from the Government Whips Office to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in July 1998; and on which date such authorisation was made; [64545]

(2) which Ministers and officials in *(a)* the Government Whips Office and *(b)* the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food negotiated the (i) transfer date and (ii) purchase price of the computer equipment transferred from the Government Whips Office to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in July 1998; on what date such details were agreed; and if he will make a statement. [64546]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* Arrangements for the transfer of two laptop computers from the Whips office to MAFF, and their replacement with the latest, equivalent machines, were made between my Private Office and the Chief Whips Private Office

according to standard procedure. The agreed bill was £9,738.48 for the new equipment and £1,468.75 for software installation costs. Both figures are inclusive of VAT. The relevant invoices were dealt with on receipt on 17 September and 15 October respectively.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what remedial work has been carried out on behalf of his Department on the computer equipment transferred from the Government Whips Office to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in July 1998; and if he will make a statement. [64547]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* None.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the adequacy of computer equipment in his Department. [64549]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* My Department is equipped with office and IT systems, designed to enable efficient delivery of services in line with Departmental objectives. The capability and performance of our computer equipment is kept under constant review to ensure that it is fit for the departmental purposes on which it is deployed. Significant upgrades are planned in some areas for 1999, particularly in MAFF's Regional Service Centres.

Slaughterhouses

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the costs of enforcing specified risk material controls in licensed slaughterhouses and cutting plants. [66118]

Mr. Nick Brown: My colleagues and I have carefully considered the cost of enforcement of these controls. We have reluctantly concluded that we can no longer defer the introduction of charges to the industry to cover these costs and that they must be transferred from taxpayers to the industry from 29 March 1999.

SRM controls are in the fundamental interest of the industry since, by protecting animal and public health from the risk of BSE and related diseases, they enhance consumer confidence and so bolster demand for meat and meat products.

Interested parties are being consulted on the details of the necessary legislation and a copy of the consultation package has been placed in the Library of the House. Comments are required by 12 February 1999.

Farmers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assistance is being provided for farmers to diversify and to generate income from new sources. [65707]

Mr. Morley: Funding to encourage a wide range of agricultural activities, including farm diversification, is available in the six areas designated to receive assistance under the English Objective 5b Structural Fund Programmes. No grant aid for farm diversification is available outside these areas. However, in order to assist farmers in developing successful diversified enterprises, the Ministry has produced a series of advisory booklets on farm diversification.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what incentives and support his Department is providing to farmers to pursue an agri-environmentally friendly farming policy. [65706]

Mr. Morley: MAFF operates a wide ranging package of voluntary environmental schemes aimed at encouraging farmers to conserve the countryside and its wildlife. Financial provision for England's agri-environment programme this year is £82 million. Following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review we have announced that we aim to expand the areas protected and enhanced under the agri-environment schemes. During the next three years an additional £40 million will be available in England for improvements and enhancements to these schemes.

Through ADAS and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, MAFF also funds free initial advice to farmers in England on all aspects of conservation, farm woodland and set-aside. The financial provision for advice this year is over £1 million.

Revised Codes of Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Water, Air and Soil, together with a new summary leaflet, were launched in October 1998. The Codes are designed to provide clear, practical advice to farmers and represent the industry standard of good practice for the prevention of agricultural pollution.

US Beef Exports

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of allegations of the National Association of Federal Veterinarians that some US vets have been pressurised to certify US beef for export as free from symptoms of central nervous system diseases in a manner contrary to EU regulations; and if he will make a statement. [64830]

Mr. Rooker: The Chief Veterinary Officer has written to his counterpart in the United States seeking his comments on the allegations in the October edition of the "Federal Veterinarian" publication. I will write to the hon. Member as soon as a response is received.

Badgers

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to publish the research carried out by his Department's laboratories into levels of trace elements in the livers of badgers. [64980]

Mr. Rooker: The relatively small number of badger livers (343) analysed in this limited study do not yield results sufficiently robust to be of interest to a scientific journal. The results will, therefore, not be published. They are being written up and will be made available on request. I shall place a copy in the Library.

Condensate Spreading

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to end the practice of spreading condensate on grazing land. [65295]

Mr. Rooker: The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee has considered the practice of spreading rendering condensate on fields. The Committee noted the difficulty of establishing the origin of any ruminant protein found in condensate and concluded that spreading condensate on fields where cattle might graze should be prohibited. The Committee's concerns were related to the risk from BSE to animal rather than human health.

Renderers will be advised that the presence of ruminant protein in condensate means that the practice of spreading it contravenes the Fertilisers (Mammalian Meat and Bone Meal) Regulations 1998. This legislation contains the specific offence of spreading material containing protein on agricultural land and is enforced by the appropriate local authority.

Cattle (Trace Element Deficiencies)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to publish the preliminary findings into trace element deficiencies in cattle piloted in the epidemiological investigation survey during November. [64845]

Mr. Rooker: The purpose of this pilot study was to assess how well the new epidemiological questionnaire would perform in the field prior to its being introduced on a national basis. It was never the intention to analyse the data collected; indeed, the sample size of 36 farms is such that any analysis would be unlikely to yield reliable results.

Quarantine

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will list the recommendations in Professor Kennedy's report, "Quarantine and Rabies-A Reappraisal", which would require primary legislation; and if he will make a statement; [65502]

(2) what representations he has received on implementing the proposed changes to the quarantine laws by *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary legislation; and if he will make a statement. [65503]

Mr. Rooker: I have received a paper from Passports for Pets expressing the view that all of the Advisory Group's recommendations can be implemented by secondary legislation. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will be meeting Passports for Pets on 25 January to hear their views.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to publish a consultation paper relating to the Animal Health (Amendment) Act 1998; and when he expects the Act to come into force. [65504]

Mr. Rooker: The Act came into force on 21 July 1998. No order has been made yet. The Government are currently considering the responses to consultation on the Kennedy Report on Rabies Quarantine. We expect a separate consultation on animal welfare matters and quarantine premises to follow during the Spring. An Order, under Section 10 of the Animal Health Act 1981 would follow this.

Tobacco Farmers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure the removal of the subsidy provided to tobacco farmers in Europe. [65705]

Mr. Rooker: The Government strongly disapprove of the Common Agricultural Policy support regime for tobacco and would like to see an end to it. We believe that the Community should progressively disengage from support for tobacco production, on grounds of health and cost. Following the reform of the regime agreed in June last year we continue to press for further amendments. However, such further reform would require the support of a qualified majority in the Agriculture Council.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 18 January 1999

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the rates of pay for people on St. Helena paid from Government funds for the last 10 years for which figures are available. [65790]

Clare Short: The table lists the average pay per annum, over the last 10 years, for our Technical Co-operation and Overseas Service Aid Scheme officers in St. Helena. Other allowances have not been included as they vary over time and by individual circumstances.

£

Year	*Average pay*
1989	21,713
1990	22,251
1991	24,746
1992	26,310
1993	27,619
1994	28,172
1995	28,585
1996	28,527
1997	28,601
1998	29,811

Nicaragua and Honduras

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are the current arrangements for repayments of debts by Nicaragua and Honduras to the British Government. [65338]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

At the Paris Club meeting on 9 December the UK agreed to grant a three year moratorium on debt service payments from Nicaragua. Nicaragua need not make any payments to the UK Government before 2001. The government have already cancelled all debts owed to the UK by Honduras.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the current amount of debt owed to Britain by Nicaragua and Honduras. [65337]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

ECGD is owed some £1 million by Nicaragua. The Government had already forgiven all debts owed to the UK by Honduras before Hurricane Mitch struck.

WALES

Small and Medium Enterprises

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the number of new small and medium enterprises which were set up in each county in Wales for each of the past 10 years. [65417]

Mr. Hain: There are no estimates available centrally of the number of small or medium enterprises that have been set up in each county.

However, the Department of Trade and Industry publishes estimates of the number of enterprises registering for VAT, which serve as a guide to the pattern of business start-ups. The following table shows the number of VAT registrations from 1994 to 1997, for unitary authorities in Wales. Information prior to 1994 is available only for the former Welsh county structure.

Business start-ups: enterprises registering for VAT, 1994–97[1]

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Blaenau Gwent	95	105	95	70
Bridgend	250	200	250	270
Caerphilly	270	240	260	265
Cardiff	805	715	780	755
Carmarthenshire	415	415	400	400
Ceredigion	175	190	200	200
Conwy	255	240	260	220
Denbighshire	235	205	195	245
Flintshire	360	355	310	310
Gwynedd	285	290	270	255
Isle of Anglesey	130	100	135	135
Merthyr Tydfil	85	75	90	100
Monmouthshire	275	260	280	310
Neath Port Talbot	215	220	240	205
Newport	285	245	270	310
Pembrokeshire	265	285	295	330
Powys	370	390	385	400
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	370	360	295	375
Swansea	440	440	425	420
Torfaen	140	150	155	155
The Vale of Glamorgan	310	275	295	275
Wrexham	255	240	220	235
Wales	6,280	5,985	6,105	6,240

[1] Rounded to the nearest 5

Source:

Department of Trade and Industry

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the number of small and medium enterprises which went out of business in each county of Wales for each of the past 10 years. [65416]

Mr. Hain: There are no estimates available centrally of the number of small or medium enterprises that have gone out of business in each county.

However, the Department of Trade and Industry publishes estimates of the number of enterprises de-registering for VAT, which serve as a guide to the pattern of business closures. The following table shows the number of VAT de-registrations from 1994 to 1997, for unitary authorities in Wales. Information prior to 1994 is available only for the former Welsh county structure.

Business closures—enterprises de-registering from VAT, 1994–97[1]

	1994	1995	1996	1997
Blaenau Gwent	120	130	110	80
Bridgend	345	275	235	235
Caerphilly	345	315	265	275
Cardiff	915	740	700	690
Carmarthenshire	615	490	470	405
Ceredigion	275	230	205	210
Conwy	345	310	310	275
Denbighshire	305	290	270	285
Flintshire	425	385	365	345
Gwynedd	420	285	305	325
Isle of Anglesey	175	160	175	140
Merthyr Tydfil	140	120	90	85
Monmouthshire	345	290	275	270
Neath Port Talbot	300	255	260	240
Newport	375	315	270	290
Pembrokeshire	465	345	350	340
Powys	550	450	435	410
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	545	440	385	330
Swansea	640	480	545	425
Torfaen	210	175	160	135
The Vale of Glamorgan	385	360	315	270
Wrexham	310	285	255	250
Wales	8,545	7,125	6,750	6,320

[1] Rounded to the nearest 5

Source:
Department of Trade and Industry

European Grants (Rhuddlan)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number and types of audit available to his Department to ensure that European funding is properly spent, indicating how many of the audits were used to monitor European grants to the ex-Rhuddlan Borough Council between 1988 and 1996; and if he will make a statement. [65412]

Mr. Hain: Prime responsibility for the management and control of approved projects rests with the project sponsor.

In the case of Rhuddlan Borough Council they would have had their own internal audit review systems, and these would have been subject to annual external audit by auditors appointed by the Audit Commission.

The Welsh Office relies upon certificates provided by external auditors, which would have been the case with the former Rhuddlan Borough Council, and these attest to the accuracy of the final claims submitted in respect of each project.

The Department undertakes site visits to assess progress. Rhuddlan Borough Council was visited in 1992 and 1994.

The European Court of Auditors also undertakes independent visits. Rhuddlan Borough Council was visited in 1993 and 1995.

The Welsh Office's own systems of control and payments are subject to internal audit review and examination by the Comptroller and Auditor-General.

Inward Investment

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his action to promote inward investment into Wales; and if he must seek the approval of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry before making any offer to a potential investor. [66136]

Mr. Hain: We continue to create an attractive commercial and economic environment for indigenous as well as inward investing companies. My right hon. Friend will be leading an inward investment mission to North America in the Spring, hosting events for inward investors, promoting Wales generally and meeting potential investors to further Wales' prospects of even greater success. These activities are in addition to the work undertaken by the strengthened Welsh Development Agency and other bodies in Wales.

Although there is no requirement to seek the approval of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry before making offers of support to potential investors, offers of assistance are subject to inter-Departmentally agreed rules designed to ensure appropriate co-ordination of assistance offered across the UK. These rules are currently being revised to reflect the devolution settlements and the revised arrangements will be set out in a concordat on financial assistance to industry, which we hope to publish shortly.

Bus Services

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the public funding for rural and urban bus services in each county of Wales over the next three years. [66179]

Mr. Hain: For 1999–2000, I am making £5 million available to local authorities in bus subsidy grant, which is in addition to the support for socially necessary services provided by local authorities out of their unhypothecated resources. Of the £5 million, £3 million must be spent on support for rural bus services, with local authorities free to decide whether to spend the remaining £2 million on either rural or urban services. I am currently consulting on the distribution formulae used to allocate the grant to individual local authorities, and I will be announcing the allocations shortly.

Health Trust Reorganisation

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the savings which will result from health trust reorganisation in each of the first three years after implementation. [66366]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The net (cost) savings for the first 3 years have been estimated as follows:

Year	*£000*
1999–2000	(4,860)
2000–01	3,100
2001–02	6,320

These figures are indicative as total costs depend heavily on exact details of redundancies which are yet to be established. Therefore, 1999–2000 costs may be reduced.

Net savings are expected to rise to around £7 million per annum within 6 years.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Driving Tests

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors were used by the Driving Standards Agency to determine acceptable distances for customers to travel to other driving test centres following the closure of their local facility. [65351]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We consider what would be reasonable distances for customers to travel to take their test, based on information from customer surveys, analyses of the postcodes of test candidates, and in the light of experience gained from establishing the new network of driving theory tests centres. In general, candidates should not have to travel further than 7 miles in administrative districts with a population density of 1,250 or more persons per sq. k, 30 miles in districts with a population density of fewer than 100 persons per sq. k, and 20 miles elsewhere.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors have resulted in changes in the criteria for the closure of driving test centres over the past 10 years. [65355]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The criteria of operational suitability, cost efficiency and a safe environment for staff and customers have remained unchanged during the period. However, the fall in demand for driving tests during the 1990s has resulted in a need to rationalise the estate to reduce overcapacity, which would otherwise be a burden upon costs and therefore test fees. As part of this process, we have established guidelines for the maximum a candidate should have to travel to a test centre: 7 miles in administrative districts with a population density of 1,250 or more persons per sq. k, 30 miles in districts with a population density of fewer than 100 persons per sq. k, and 20 miles elsewhere.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the consultative process prior to closure of driving test centres is used in all cases. [65350]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Yes, except when we have to close a test centre temporarily or at short notice, owing to health and safety, or operational reasons. In such cases, consultation before closure may not be possible. The Driving Standards Agency gives as much notice as possible to interested parties about a closure and the alternative arrangements that are being made.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what savings have resulted from the closure of driving test centres in each year since the inception of the Driving Standards Agency; and what future savings resulting from closures of driving test centres have been planned for. [65356]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Driving Standards Agency estimates that, since the start of the 1993 financial year, savings in rent and rates payments of £700,000 have accumulated as a result of closures. Figures from before then are not available. There has also been over £1 million of capital receipts from the sale of freehold properties.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors have contributed to falls in demand for *(a)* practical and *(b)* theory driving tests in each of the regions, with particular reference to the effect of the introduction of the theory test on demand; what assessment the Driving Standards Agency has made of future changes in demand for theory and practical tests; and what steps will be taken to meet changes in demand. [65352]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The key factor underlying the number of candidates coming forward for a driving test is the number of young persons becoming eligible to obtain a driving licence. 54 per cent. of theory test candidates and 55 per cent. of practical test candidates are aged under 20 years.

Overall test demand is also strongly influenced by the pass rate as this affects the number of retests being taken by unsuccessful candidates. The national average pass rate for car theory tests is currently 59 per cent. and 47 per cent. for car practical tests.

The theory test has added another step to the learning to drive process, though it has probably not deterred people altogether. Applications for practical tests reflect the staged-testing process and also a recent fall in the theory test pass rate.

Demand for the practical test may temporarily increase in the first months of this year as candidates try to pass before the introduction of the longer practical test in the Spring, with an offsetting decrease afterwards, but in the longer term returning to recent levels.

No special regional factors have been identified.

The Driving Standards Agency has introduced more flexible staffing arrangements to cope with fluctuations in demand.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of *(a)* the extent to which the proposed installation of digital technology for the Coastguard Service will provide a fully integrated service that is year 2000 compliant and *(b)* the adequacy of consultation with end users prior to introducing such new technology for the Coastguard Service. [65264]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The draft Statement of Service Requirements (SSR) which is shortly to be issued to prospective suppliers contains the following statement:

> "All equipment and associated systems supplied for Integrated Coastguard Communication System (ICCS) must be millennium proof. By this we mean that equipment installed before the end of the century must be capable of an uninterrupted transition from 1990 to 2000 dates without subsequent adjustment. Likewise, all equipment installed after January 2000 must be capable of working effectively with both pre and post millennium dates.
>
> It is anticipated that this is most likely to be an issue in relation to the aural recording and retrieval features. Special assurance is required that where recordings are made prior to midnight on 31 December 1999 or through midnight, they are capable of seamless retrieval after that date".

However, it is proposed that the first operational ICCS equipment will be installed after January 2000.

End users have been involved in the ICCS project from its inception. The statement requirements for ICCS was drawn up by a group chaired by the former Coastguard Agency's Chief Technical Officer which included operational coastguard representation. Prior to that there had been an internal Agency review of requirements compiled by another group which also included several operational Coastguards. The outline ICCS proposals also formed part of the 5 year strategy document which was distributed to all Agency staff in January 1998.

Sporting Facilities

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made in considering means to prevent owners from deliberately running down or demolishing sporting facilities following the court's decision in the Thames Ditton Lawn Tennis Club case. [65428]

Mr. Raynsford: We have received representations to strengthen planning controls over the demolition of various types of sports facilities. We are currently considering these and hope to announce the outcome shortly. We shall consult on any proposed changes to the existing planning arrangements.

Road Safety (Mobile Telephones)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will establish a campaign to reduce the number of accidents caused by drivers using mobile telephones. [65494]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In March 1998, the Government launched a publicity campaign consisting of newspaper advertisements and an advisory leaflet designed to make clear to motorists the dangers of using mobile phones while driving. The advisory leaflet is used by police and road safety officers in their safety campaigns.

Land Supply and Housing

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the research into the land supply and housing demand model, undertaken by the Government Office for London and the South East and the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, will be published. [65654]

Mr. Raynsford: The Report, "Housing in the South East: The inter-relationship between supply, demand and land use policy", will be published shortly.

Roads Review

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the *(a)* new roads and *(b)* road improvement projects which were announced in the roads review for which the statutory undertaker plans to apply for funding support from the EU. [65479]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The bids put forward by the Highways Agency for funding in 1999 relate to route management strategies and telematics projects. The European Commission is considering these at present. New roads and road improvement projects announced in the Roads Review will be considered, when appropriate, for bids in future years.

Traffic Calming

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has undertaken on the effects of traffic-calming methods on *(a)* emergency vehicles and *(b)* public transport vehicles, with particular reference to low-deck vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [65675]

Ms Glenda Jackson: All research commissioned by my Department into the design and performance of traffic calming measures has included an examination of the effects such measures will have on emergency vehicles and public transport. This research has included three track trials by the Transport Research Laboratory of road humps and chicanes where passenger comfort, operating speeds and performance of vehicles have been examined. Single deck 'low floor' buses have been included in the most recent track trial. No difficulties were experienced in negotiating the different types of 75mm high road humps comprising the trial for speeds up to 25 mph. Operationally, much lower speeds would be recommended to avoid discomfort to passengers.

Oil Discharges

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to apprehend and punish ships making illegal discharges of oil off the British coast; and if he will make a statement. [65571]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has a dedicated Enforcement Unit based at its headquarters in Southampton.

The Unit is charged to investigate all offences under the Merchant Shipping legislation and this includes pollution offences. In less than 11 months since the formation of this Unit, 7 shipowners have been convicted for pollution offences.

The UK and its European partners co-ordinate surveillance and detection of suspected polluters using sophisticated technology. Under the UK Regulations, ships suspected of pollution can be detained in port pending investigation.

Since September 1997, the maximum fine before Magistrates for pollution from ships was raised to £250,000. The maximum fine before the Crown Court is unlimited.

The MCA is committed to vigorously enforcing the anti-pollution legislation and will not hesitate to prosecute offenders whenever appropriate.

Underground Drainage

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy that it be a requirement of all industry standards and the Building Regulations that sewerage and drainage pipes should not be split or otherwise damaged as the result of cleaning activities. [65888]

Mr. Raynsford: The development of standards for construction products, including drainage pipes, is a matter for the British Standards Institution in co-operation with European standards bodies. More detailed specifications for sewerage pipes are developed by the water industry, as was indicated in an answer on 7 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *480–81*, to a Written Question from the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). These standards are not formally endorsed by my Department and are thus not subject to Government policy.

Regulation 7 of the Building Regulations requires that building work which is subject to the Regulations should be carried out using proper materials which are appropriate for the circumstances in which they are used. As the blockage of a drain or sewer can be anticipated at some time during their lifetime, it is not unreasonable to expect the pipe to be able to withstand normal cleaning activities.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will raise the standards for pipes used for underground drainage in the review of Part H of the Building Regulations to ensure they are not vulnerable to damage from *(a)* conventional rodding and *(b)* high pressure jetting. [65890]

Mr. Raynsford: The current review of Part H of the Building Regulations will consider the need for advice to ensure that pipes used for underground drainage are not vulnerable to damage during cleaning operations.

The Building Regulations are functional in nature, and do not specify standards for building materials. However, the Approved Document to Part H, which gives guidance on ways in which to achieve compliance with the Regulations, makes reference to British Standards saying any material conforming to the Standards listed may be used for below ground drainage. At this early stage in the review it cannot be said whether or not the listing will need to be amended.

Building Regulations

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the review of Part H of the Building Regulations will be concluded. [65889]

Mr. Raynsford: The review of Part H of the Building Regulations commenced last year with the preparation of outline proposals for issues which need to be addressed in the review. These proposals will be considered by the Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC) at their next meeting in February following which officials in my Department will prepare detailed proposals for their consideration later in the year.

Proposals for amendments will subsequently be subject to full consultation as required by Section 14 of the Building Act 1984. The papers for this should be ready towards the end of this year, and the subsequent period of consultation will be 3 months. The proposals will be re-considered by BRAC in the light of comments made during consultation and, if found necessary, amendments will be made to the Approved Document to Part H and, possibly, the Building Regulations. The review should thus be complete by the end of next year.

Emissions

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans to reduce UK emissions of carbon dioxide by 20 per cent. on 1990's total by the year 2010. [66041]

Mr. Meale: On 26 October 1998, the Government published a consultation paper on climate change. The paper describes progress to date in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the UK and sets out a variety of policy options for meeting our climate change targets. It covers both the UK's legally binding target from Kyoto of a 12.5 per cent. reduction in a basket of six greenhouse gases by 2008–2012 and our domestic goal of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010. Following the consultation period which closes on 12 February 1999, we will develop and consult further on a new UK climate change programme.

Private Hire Vehicles

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has following the case in the Queen's Bench Division between L. Benson and Copeland Borough Council to seek to restore the previous position whereby the spouse of a licence holder could use a private hire vehicle for any purpose other than for hire. [65872]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government consulted on options for broadening eligibility to drive licensed private hire vehicles; we are still considering the representations made and the legal issues involved. I hope to make an announcement shortly.

Dog Registration

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will establish a national compulsory dog registration scheme. [65875]

Mr. Meale: My Department is holding discussions with a number of animal welfare organisations on the issues surrounding dog registration. A decision on the appropriate way forward will be taken in due course.

Road Accident Fatalities

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by each police authority area how many people were killed in road accidents between Christmas and the New Year in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [65874]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is shown in the following table for the three years to 1997, the most recent year for which this information is available.

Road accident fatalities on 26–31 December inclusive by police force: 1995–97

Police force	*Year of accident*		
	1995	*1996*	*1997*
Avon and Somerset	1	2	0
Bedfordshire	0	2	0
Cambridgeshire	0	2	1

Road accident fatalities on 26–31 December inclusive by police force: 1995–97

Police force	Year of accident 1995	1996	1997
Central	0	0	1
Cheshire	0	2	2
City of London	0	0	0
Cleveland	0	0	0
Cumbria	0	0	0
Derbyshire	2	2	0
Devon and Cornwall	1	3	0
Dorset	0	1	0
Dumfries and Galloway	0	0	0
Durham	2	0	0
Dyfed-Powys	0	1	0
Essex	0	3	0
Fife	1	0	0
Gloucestershire	1	1	0
Grampian	0	0	1
Greater Manchester	2	4	2
Gwent	0	1	4
Hampshire	1	1	2
Hertfordshire	0	0	0
Humberside	1	2	1
Kent	1	0	1
Lancashire	0	2	0
Leicestershire	0	1	1
Lincolnshire	0	2	2
Lothian and Borders	0	0	1
Merseyside	1	1	0
Metropolitan Police	2	1	3
Norfolk	1	0	1
North Wales	0	0	0
North Yorkshire	1	0	2
Northamptonshire	0	1	0
Northern	0	1	0
Northumbria	0	0	4
Nottinghamshire	2	1	0
South Wales	2	0	2
South Yorkshire	0	1	0
Staffordshire	0	2	1
Strathclyde	2	1	2
Suffolk	0	0	1
Surrey	0	1	2
Sussex	0	5	0
Tayside	0	0	0
Thames Valley	3	2	0
Warwickshire	0	0	1
West Mercia	0	3	0
West Midlands	1	3	3
West Yorkshire	0	4	0
Wiltshire	4	0	1
Total	32	59	42

Driving Instructors

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people are *(a)* registered as approved driving instructors, *(b)* hold trainee licences and *(c)* have applications for registration under consideration. [65724]

Ms Glenda Jackson: At the end of November 1998, there were 29,581 Approved Driving Instructors, 921 trainee licence holders, and 17,917 applications for registration.

Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the forthcoming financial, management and policy review of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. [66569]

Mr. Meacher: As part of the Government's programme of regular financial, management and policy reviews of non-departmental public bodies, we are to conduct a review of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. The review will evaluate the role and performance of the Royal Commission in order to make recommendations on its future development; in particular on the scope, focus and impact of the Commission's inquiries; and on its working methods and resources, and how these are managed. In carrying out the study, my Department will consult widely with relevant organisations and with those who have experience of the Royal Commission's work.

Private Rental Deposits

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made to ensure the safety of private rental deposits; and if he will make a statement. [66436]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *47*.

London Underground

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many London Underground stations operate an exit-only policy between 8 am and 10 am Monday to Fridays; and what are the reasons for their doing so. [66433]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The only station that passengers are currently prevented from entering between 8 and 10 am each Monday to Friday is Chancery Lane. This is because of long-term engineering work on escalators.

However, there are occasions where stations implement what is known as 'station control' for safety reasons, thereby preventing overcrowding on platforms. This is where passengers are prevented from entering the system until platforms have been cleared. This usually lasts for only a few minutes, though in extreme cases, the station may close completely for a short while.

Warsaw Convention (Air Accidents)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the operation of the Warsaw convention in relation to air accidents as it applies to *(a)* United Kingdom-based airlines and *(b)* airlines using UK airports; and if he will make a statement. [66394]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Warsaw convention is an agreement relating to international carriage by air. Signed originally in 1929, it has been the subject of a number of amendments which have not necessarily been ratified by all the original signatories. Although the United Kingdom has ratified all the amendments currently in force, the operation of the convention in relation to international carriage performed by foreign airlines using UK airports will depend upon the level of accession to the convention by the foreign airline's country of origin and the airline's conditions of carriage. The convention, as amended by the Hague Protocol 1955, applies in the UK by subordinate

legislation to domestic carriage performed by any airline but with numerous modifications, including an uplifting of passenger liability limits. Protocol No. 4 of Montreal 1975 has recently entered into force and provision for implementation, for both international carriage and, with modifications, for domestic carriage, is currently the subject of consultation. I expect two draft Orders in Council for approval by resolution of each House to be laid soon.

To coincide with the entry into force of Council Regulation 2027/97 in October last year, Parliament adopted the Air Carrier Liability Order 1998 which introduced, for the purposes of national legislation giving force to the Warsaw convention for both international and domestic carriage, unlimited liability for passenger claims with strict liability up to 100,000 SDR for United Kingdom and other Community airlines.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation plans to hold a Diplomatic Conference later this year for the purpose of adopting a new convention intended to replace all previous Warsaw instruments and broadly to align the liability provisions with those of the Council Regulation. Officials from my Department have been involved in the development of the new convention and the United Kingdom will participate actively in the Conference.

Government Fleet Vehicles

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many Government fleet vehicles currently run on *(a)* liquid petroleum gas and *(b)* naturally compressed gas. [66073]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government currently have 33 vehicles which run on liquid petroleum gas, with another 72 vehicles on order. They also have two vehicles which run on compressed natural gas.

Gas-fuelled Vehicles

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what trials his Department has commissioned into the conversion of heavy goods vehicles and passenger service vehicles to liquid petroleum gas and naturally compressed gas. [66074]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department has kept closely in touch with the work that some operators have done on the advantages and disadvantages of converting heavy goods vehicles and passenger service vehicles to use road fuel gases, including a number of tests carried out by London Transport Buses. The Cleaner Vehicles Task Force has also set up a sub-group to consider the merits and longer term potential of alternative fuels. The Energy Saving Trust's Powershift programme, funded by the Government, provides grants towards alternatively fuelled vehicles, and the costs and performance of vehicles purchased under the scheme are monitored and evaluated.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives the Government have taken for the conversion of local government vehicles to naturally compressed gas and liquid petroleum gas; and how many local authorities have taken advantage of this. [66075]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Energy Saving Trust's Powershift programme, funded by the Government, provides grants towards alternatively fuelled vehicles including those running on road fuel gases. 73 local authorities have so far benefited from Powershift grants for gas vehicles. My Department has also funded the first stage of the ALTER (Alternative Traffic in Towns) project which is a Europe-wide initiative that encourages local administrations to purchase clean vehicles and to convert existing vehicles to cleaner fuels. To date 32 cities, towns and counties in the UK have signed up to this initiative.

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to ensure that people are able to travel on the west coast Mainline without having to pre-book seats. [66077]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Franchising Director regulates Virgin's Saver and Weekly Season Tickets. Virgin cannot require these tickets to be pre-booked and must make provision to accommodate demand for these types of ticket in their train services without allowing overcrowding to occur. For tickets which are unregulated Virgin is free to impose pre-booking as a condition of sale.

Cycle Routes

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue national guidance on the paint colours to be used for cycle routes by local authorities. [66117]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Coloured road surfaces have no meaning in law, and are not prescribed in the current Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (TSRGD). However, coloured surfaces are commonly used to give prominence to a section of the carriageway set aside for a particular purpose. In the case of cycle lanes, my Department is considering including guidance in the new Local Transport Note on Signs for Cycle Facilities to be published after the new TSRGD is published later this year. The Highways Agency will also be publishing its own general guidance—Coloured Surfacing in Road Layouts (Excluding Traffic Calming)—in February, and this will include some advice on the use of coloured surfaces for cycle lanes.

Waste Management

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend the United Kingdom Management Plan for Exports and Imports of Waste. [65804]

Mr. Meale: The UK policies on exports and imports of waste are set out in the "United Kingdom Management Plan for Exports and Imports of Waste", which was published on 16 May 1996. The Plan came into effect on 1 June 1996.

Under the Plan imports of waste from European Community Member States, with the exception of Ireland and Portugal, for disposal by high temperature incineration are being progressively phased out under an annual quota. The quota is due to expire on 31 May 1999.

There is, at present, an apparent inconsistency over whether waste imported under the quota needs to be disposed of, or simply imported into the UK, by 31 May 1999. Following public consultation on this issue, my Department today placed in the Library of both Houses an amendment to the Plan, making it clear that the waste must arrive at the appropriate disposal facility by 31 May 1999. This amendment will come into effect on Tuesday 19 January 1999.

Land Use

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will instruct local authorities to keep registers of all brownfield sites in their districts indicating (i) dormant, (ii) derelict, (iii) vacant, (iv) underused and (v) underutilised land in *(a)* public and *(b)* private ownership. [66108]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government are now in the process of setting up the National Land Use Database. This will provide a comprehensive national picture of previously developed sites, including derelict land and vacant buildings, which may be available for development. First stage results are expected by the end of March. A copy of the specification for the database, listing the types and characteristics of the sites covered, has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue planning policy guidance to local planning authorities to consider refusal of planning applications for greenfield site developments until they are satisfied that brownfield sites have been fully utilised. [66107]

Mr. Raynsford: The priority to be given to the use of previously developed greenfield sites for housing will be considered in the draft revision of Planning Policy Guidance note on Housing (PPG3) which will be issued for consultation shortly.

Yachts (Registration)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason yachts registered under the Merchant Navy Act 1894 must be re-registered every five years. [66361]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The previous registration regulations were largely based upon the Merchant Shipping Act 1894 and so represented the requirements for registration at that time. Unfortunately there was no provision for deleting vessels from the register, unless notified by the owner, where they had been sold to a foreign owner. More importantly, ships that were sunk could not be removed either. Over time this meant that many ships remained on the register when in fact they did not exist. Additionally, owners have not always updated their address when they moved which has resulted in out of date information being held.

The new regulations aim to keep the data more accurate whilst minimising the effect upon owners. An up to date register will be easier to administer and enable us to transfer all relevant records to our computer database without the additional cost involved in transferring redundant information. This in turn will enable us to keep registration costs as low as possible. We will also have accurate records to assist Coastguards in an emergency and will be able to confirm current ownership quickly if registered owners find themselves in difficulty in foreign ports. Finally, it will enable us to discharge our international obligation to maintain the register more effectively and provide data to those that require it i.e. transcripts, etc., in an improved and efficient manner.

DEFENCE

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans he has to reduce his Department's payments to the Export Credits Guarantee Department; [65000]

(2) if he will provide a breakdown of the £42 million expenditure from his Department to the Export Credits Guarantee Department. [64999]

Mr. Spellar: Since 1986–87 the Ministry of Defence has made contributions to the ECGD. The main purpose of these payments has been to provide interest rate support for defence exports to Jordan. Additionally, in the years 1986–87 to 1988–89, payments were made to ECGD to provide interest rate support for Oman. The contributions are as follows:

£000

Year	*Expenditure*
1986–87	894
1987–88	972
1988–89	1,118
1989–90	993
1990–91	1,058
1991–92	1,356
1992–93	1,054
1993–94	852
1994–95	642
1995–96	879
1996–97	457
1997–98	278
1998–99 (forecast)	108
1999–2000 (forecast)	33

No further contributions are due after 1999–2000.

BBC (Iraq Coverage)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he had with the BBC concerning the BBC's handling of the Iraq conflict; and if he will make a statement. [65645]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Government were concerned to ensure that the British public were provided with factual and balanced reporting of Operation Desert Fox. Journalists reporting from Baghdad were, and are, subject to considerable restrictions on access and information. It was particularly important, therefore, that live coverage of and commentary on Operation Desert Fox from Iraq should explain, and take account of, such restrictions. This was made clear to media representatives, including in the BBC, on a number of occasions.

Submarines

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the crew number of the *(a)* Trafalgar and *(b)* Vanguard class of submarines. [65739]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Ship's Company of a Trafalgar class submarine consists of 16 Officers, 53 Senior Ratings and 62 Junior Ratings, a total of 131.

There are currently two crewing methods for the Vanguard class submarine: boats either have two crews or a single augmented (gold) crew. Two of the Vanguard class have gold crews, the other two have two crews each, known as hybrid manning. The single Vanguard crew is 142 people, consisting of 18 Officers, 60 Senior Ratings and 64 Junior Ratings. The augmented, or gold, crew is 202 people, comprising 21 Officers, 80 Senior Ratings and 101 Junior Ratings.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of his Department's review of MOD medical services. [65743]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Defence Medical Services (DMS) Study Team comprised four military officers, including representation from all three Services, and two civil servants. The study work formed part of their normal duties and there were therefore no additional staffing costs to the defence budget. Travel and subsistence costs incurred by the team amounted to some £1,000.

The team's conclusions and the Defence Secretary's vision for the future were published in a booklet sent to every member of the DMS. Printing costs totalled some £9,672.

Future Head Office

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the budget for the refurbishing of his Department's Future Head Office. [65627]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The project to redevelop the Ministry of Defence Main Building in Whitehall is being undertaken as a Public Private Partnership scheme. The Amey/Hyder/Kvaerner consortium was appointed as the preferred bidder on 8 January 1999. The cost of the programme is commercially sensitive until final negotiations are concluded with the preferred bidder. I will provide cost information when a contract has been signed.

DERA

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many patents are held by DERA; and what value his Department places on DERA's patent portfolio. [65631]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* DERA currently has patents or patent applications on approximately 1,050 inventions, some of which are held jointly with another party. Most are held in a number of countries, giving a total of approximately 3,300 granted patents and 2,400 pending applications. Work is in hand in MOD, as part of the DERA PPP options study, to ensure that the proposed solution protects the value of these to MOD in the long term.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to make a decision about the future of DERA. [65630]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* My noble Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement, Lord Gilbert, expects initial advice from a team studying the options around the end of March. Following further internal discussions and consultation with colleagues, we would hope to make a decision later this year.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage golden share his Department will maintain in the reorganised DERA. [65632]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Following advice from the MOD team studying the options, we hope to make a decision about the future of DERA later this year. However, until then, and until options have been fully explored, it is impossible to predict what arrangements will be necessary.

Controlled Substances (Emissions)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the letter of 3 October 1998 (D/Min/DP/Jb3521/98/M) from the Minister for Defence Procurement to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what progress was made in 1998 by his Department in reducing its use of controlled substances under the Montreal Protocol whenever acceptable alternatives were available, and to minimising emissions of materials where they must still be used; and if he will provide specific examples. [65388]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has programmes in place, where technically feasible, to convert equipment and facilities to use materials that do not deplete the ozone layer. However, owing to the complexity and inevitable length of these programmes, the progress made during 1998 should be seen in the context of longer-term developments.

The Royal Navy has reduced the total installed charge of CFC-12, used in marine refrigeration and air conditioning systems, from 40 tonnes at the beginning of 1996 to 8 tonnes by the end of 1998. New refrigeration equipment was procured last year to enable the conversion of the remaining surface vessels by the end of 1999 and the conversion program for the Trafalgar class submarines was started. During 1998, the Army continued trials of alternatives to halon fire extinguishants for use in armoured vehicle engine compartments and two alternative refrigerants are being evaluated for specific vehicle applications. The RAF completed a study that identified alternatives to the CFC solvent used in cleaning of oxygen equipment and also eliminated the use of the CFC necessary for the maintenance and testing of the VC10 cabin conditioning equipment. A modification programme was initiated to replace the CFC in refrigerators on the E3 Sentry and is due for completion by the middle of this year.

For applications where no acceptable halon alternatives have been identified, my Department, through the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, and the Royal Navy continued their research into new chemical fire extinguishants and water mist technologies.

To minimise emissions of the controlled substances, the Royal Navy has procured and is installing high integrity valves and flexible refrigerant hoses for its vessels. A lubricant additive was successfully evaluated, procured and installed in most vessels to assist in the detection of leakages. Competitive tenders for electronic leak detection equipment are currently being assessed, following the successful completion of an evaluation program. All the Services have procured equipment and introduced procedures to recover the materials for recycling during system maintenance. Education and training of users of ozone depleting substances are featured in the comprehensive package of environmental protection courses made available by the RAF to all members of the Department during 1998.

Staff College, Camberley

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Joint Doctrine Centre will move to the buildings of the Staff College, Camberley. [65919]

Mr. Doug Henderson: A number of options are being considered for the location of the Joint Defence Centre but the matter has not yet been put to Ministers.

101 Battalion REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answers of 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *450*; 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *54*; and 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *523*, if he will review the decision to transfer 101 Battalion REME (V) from Chorley to Queensferry. [66070]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I am satisfied that there are no substantial grounds to review the decision to transfer the Headquarters of HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley TA Centre to Queensferry TA Centre.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the transfer of 101 Battalion HQ REME (V) from Chorley to Queensferry to begin; and what will be the time scale of the transfer. [66071]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Detailed arrangements for the transfer of HQ Battalion REME are still in preparation, with the aim of establishing the Headquarters in Queensferry on 1 July 1999. Some personnel are likely to be retained beyond that date at the TA Centre in Chorley.

Land Command

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which external body is responsible for auditing the financial decisions taken by Land Command. [66072]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The National Audit Office.

RAF Chilmark

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost to date of *(a)* ordnance and chemical clearance and *(b)* other preparatory site work in connection with disposal of the former RAF Chilmark. [65429]

Mr. Spellar: The cost to date of ordnance and chemical clearance at the former RAF Chilmark is £1.09m. This is made up of manpower costs, together with the cost of buying and hiring plant and equipment. The preparatory site work to date has cost an additional £0.213m. This has been spent on Land Quality Assessments. These test the condition of the soil and indicate where remediation work is necessary to ensure that the land will be fit for future use.

Chief of the Defence Staff

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the names and current appointments of those senior officers who are being considered for the post of Chief of the Defence Staff. [65745]

Mr. George Robertson: The selection process for the successor to General Sir Charles Guthrie has not begun.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date General Sir Charles Guthrie will retire from his appointment as Chief of the Defence Staff. [65747]

Mr. George Robertson: No decision has yet been taken on the retirement date of General Sir Charles Guthrie, the Chief of the Defence Staff.

Falklands War Veterans' Illnesses

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what policies he has to deal with veterans of the Falklands War who suffer from stress-related illness. [65918]

Mr. Spellar: The Armed Forces provide appropriate treatment for serving personnel suffering from stress-related illness, including those who served in the South Atlantic Campaign. The Armed Forces also have a range of measures in place aimed at preventing stress-related illness among serving personnel, with particular attention paid to those deployed on operational or peacekeeping duties. Medical care of ex-Service personnel is the responsibility of the National Health Service.

Gulf Veterans' Illnesses

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to appoint the next Chairman of the Independent Panel which oversees his Department's interactions research programme into Gulf Veterans' Illnesses. [66578]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Professor Donald Davies has agreed to take on the role of Chairman of the Independent Panel overseeing the MOD Interactions research programme. This programme is designed to investigate the possible adverse health effects of the combination of vaccines and tablets which were given to UK troops during the Gulf conflict to protect them against biological and chemical warfare agents. This is an important part of the broader ongoing research programme into Gulf War veterans' illnesses.

Professor Davies is the Director of the Department of Clinical Pharmacology (Division of Medicine) at Imperial College School of Medicine and the Director of the Department of Health Toxicology Unit, located at the same site. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Royal College of Pathologists, and an honorary member of the Royal College of Physicians.

Professor Davies is presently a member of the Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment, and the National Biological Standards Board; he also sits on the expert Panel which advises the European Medicines Evaluation Agency; and he was a member of the Committee on Safety of Medicines until December 1998. We expect that the next meeting of the Independent Panel, the first at which Professor Davies will act as Chairman, will be held shortly.

Common European Defence Policy

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with *(a)* the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and *(b)* other Liberal Democrat right hon. and hon. Members concerning the development of a common European defence policy. [65818]

Mr. George Robertson: I have had no discussions on this subject with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed or other Liberal Democrat right hon. and hon. Members.

Ex-prisoners of War

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the merits of an independent review of pay deductions made from officer prisoners of war and protected personnel during their incarceration in the Second World War. [65158]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave on 9 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 6–7, to the hon. Members for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb).

Defence Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Centre

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many items of metal have been excavated in land adjacent to the Defence Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Centre at Winterbourne Gunner; and how many were *(a)* buried ordnance, *(b)* ordnance containing liquid of military origin and *(c)* assorted non-ordnance items; and if he will make a statement. [65430]

Mr. Spellar: The number of items of metal which have been excavated in land adjacent to the Defence Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Centre at Winterbourne Gunner is 3,414. Of these, 382 were buried ordnance, 8 were ordnance containing liquid and 3,032 were assorted non-ordnance items.

The items of ordnance containing liquid are currently at the Chemical and Biological Defence Centre at Porton awaiting analysis to determine the nature of the liquid.

Mr. Stephen Kock

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Mr. Stephen Kock's duties were in connection with DESO between 1987 and 1992. [65143]

Mr. Spellar: None.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what documents relating to the activities of Mr. Stephen Kock have been made available to NAO officials investigating defence contracts. [65140]

Mr. Spellar: I am not aware of any request for such documents having been made by NAO officials in respect of defence export contracts. With the passage of time, however, it is not possible to review all Departmental records.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the relationship was between Mr. Stephen Kock and regiments in the British Army in the period from 1968 to 1995. [65136]

Mr. Spellar: Although Mr. Kock has never served as a member of the British Army, he is a member of the Regimental Association of the Special Air Service, which he joined in 1975 by virtue of his association with the Rhodesian Special Forces. I am not aware of any other association between Mr. Kock and Regiments in the British Army in the period from 1967 to 1995.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what role Mr. Stephen Kock played in negotiating, organising and promoting the Al Yamamah deal. [65154]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD is unaware of any involvement in the Al Yamamah programme, either now or in the past, by Mr. Stephen Kock.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what role Mr. Stephen Kock played in the Oman defence deal of 1981; [65155]

(2) what role Mr. Stephen Kock played in negotiating, organising or promoting the Jordan defence package; [65153]

(3) what role Mr. Stephen Kock played in the Indonesian defence deal of 1990; [65156]

(4) what role Mr. Stephen Kock played in negotiating a special forces base in Malaysia in the period 1985 to 1988. [65152]

Mr. Spellar: Mr. Kock has played no official role in defence exports to these countries.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which civil servants in his Department met Mr. Stephen Kock to discuss matters relating to defence contracts with Malaysia in the period from January 1985 to the end of December 1988. [65135]

Mr. Spellar: A meeting between Mr. Kock and the then Secretary of State for Defence's Private Office staff took place in June 1987. Additionally, members of the Defence Export Services Organisation are likely to have met Mr. Kock during this period in the course of their normal function of providing advice and support for defence exporters. However, with the passage of time, it has not been possible to identify details of specific contacts.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what role was played by Mr. Stephen Kock in advising Her Majesty's Government on the propellant and arms cartel run by the Swedish citizen Mr. Karl Erik Schmitz. [65133]

Mr. Spellar: I am unaware of any role played by Mr. Kock in advising Her Majesty's Government in relation to Mr. Karl Erik Schmitz.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what involvement Mr. Stephen Kock had in the preparations for privatisation of Royal Ordnance between 1984 and 1987. [65137]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD is unaware of any involvement by Mr. Kock in the preparations for the privatisation of Royal Ordnance.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what meetings Mr. Stephen Kock had with Sir James Biyth of DESO to discuss defence sales; [65144]

(2) if he will list the meetings which *(a)* Sir Peter Levene and *(b)* Sir Colin Chandler had in their Defence Procurement, Defence Sales and DESO roles with Mr. Stephen Kock. [65134]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has been unable to identify any record of such meetings. With the passage of time, however, it has not been possible to review all Departmental records.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions took place between his Department's officials and representatives of the Scott Inquiry on the advisability of calling upon Mr. Stephen Kock to give evidence to that inquiry *(a)* before, *(b)* during and *(c)* after the inquiry. [65130]

Mr. Spellar: I am advised that no such discussions took place.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

World Heritage Sites

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the Ministers with whom he has consulted regarding the proposal to nominate the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf as a world heritage site. [64421]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has Ministerial responsibility for considering responses to the public consultation suggesting that the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf should be included in the new Tentative List for the UK of potential World Heritage Sites. Ministers in the Scottish Office have not yet consulted other Ministerial colleagues about this issue, but there has been consultation at official level with the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Animation Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what support is given to the animation industry in the United Kingdom by his Department. [65714]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Total support from the National Lottery for production of animated films is £1,374,966 to date. In addition, the Arts Council of England contributes £50,000 per annum to a scheme for experimental animation, which it runs in conjunction with Channel 4.

The British Film Institute, in collaboration with Channel 4, runs two animation schemes, Animation in Residence and the British Animation Training scheme. The National Film and Television School runs a Diploma Course in Animation.

Finally, my Department has granted co-production status to a number of animated films, which has enabled them to access financial benefits in the UK and in other countries.

Tourism

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans his Department has to create new incentives and grants to develop tourist attractions in the UK and create new jobs in the tourism industry. [65717]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* New and existing attractions are benefiting from the National Lottery and, in eligible areas of the UK, from the European Regional Development Fund. The new strategy for tourism which we shall be publishing soon, will include action to help the attractions sector, and the tourism industry as a whole, maximise its potential to create jobs.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of jobs in the north-west depend on tourism; [65713]

(2) what estimates he has made of the number of people employed in tourism. [65720]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* It is estimated that there were 1.8 million self-employment and employee jobs in the tourism-related industries in Great Britain in September 1998.

An estimated 7 per cent. of the total self-employment and employee jobs in the north-west were located within the tourism-related industries in September 1998.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will estimate the turnover from tourism in the UK in each year for the next five years; [65721]

(2) how much revenue was generated through tourism by overseas visitors in the most recent year for which figures are available; and what estimates he has made of projected turnover for the next five years. [65712]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Tourism by overseas visitors generated an estimated £12.2 billion in the UK in 1997 according to the latest figures from the International Passenger Survey. In the first 10 months of 1998, overseas visitors have spent an estimated £10.8 billion in the UK, a 4 per cent. increase on the amount spent in the equivalent period in 1997.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport does not make any projections of future turnover from tourism in the UK.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what grants are available to promote the conversion of farmhouses for tourism in the north-west. [65719]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Farm tourism is growing in importance, with a 3 per cent. increase in visitors between 1996 and 1997. In areas where agriculture or traditional industries are in decline, tourism can help economic development and create jobs.

Funding to encourage a wide range of agricultural activities, including the conversion of farmhouses for tourism, is available in the north-west under the Merseyside Objective 1 and the Northern Uplands Objective 5b programmes. Grants are made through the Merseyside Farm Tourism Initiative Project in the Objective 1 designated area and the Northern Uplands Farm Tourism Initiative in the Objective 5b designated area.

In addition, The Redundant Building Grant Scheme, currently operated by the Rural Development Commission, can provide grants for the conversion or refurbishment of redundant buildings to bring them back into productive business use or to enhance their current business use.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has produced a series of advisory booklets on farm diversification in order to assist farmers in developing successful diversified enterprises.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much revenue and what new grants have been made available to promote tourism in the north-west in 1998. [65718]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The north-west, like all parts of England, benefits from the work of the British Tourist Authority and of the English Tourist Board. For 1998–99, the BTA has a grant of £35 million and the ETB a grant of £9.7 million, of which £292,000 is for the North West Tourist Board. New support structures, announced on 14 December, *Official Report*, column *352*, will ensure more effective use is made of this money in the future, with a greater proportion going to the regions.

Government support for tourism is not limited to the funding of tourist boards. An important part of what makes this country attractive to tourists from home and abroad is our arts, museums and galleries. This year DCMS will spend around £1 billion in support of them.

In addition, tourism in the north-west has benefited, both directly and indirectly, from National Lottery funding (nearly £450 million has gone to the region), and from the European Regional Development Fund.

Increasingly, local authorities, tourist boards and the private sector are working together to promote and develop tourism in their areas and some excellent examples of such partnerships are to be found in the north-west. Our strategy for tourism, to be published next month, will support such initiatives. We shall be putting forward a wide range of action points designed to ensure that tourism delivers benefits for local communities, individual tourists and the economy.

Television Licences (Pensioners)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will estimate the costs to his Department of reducing the television licence for pensioners to £25; and if he will assess the benefits of introducing this measure; [65716]

(2) if he will estimate the costs to his Department of reducing the television licence for pensioners to £40; and if he will assess the benefits of introducing this measure. [65715]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The estimated cost in lost television licence fee revenue of providing £40 colour television licences for all pensioner only households is £278 million. This would rise to £351 million if the concessionary fee were set at £25 and applied to both colour and black and white licences. The Government have no plans at present to introduce such concessions.

Millennium Projects

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) how much money, other than from the National Lottery, has been raised for each Millennium Landmark Project to date; [66161]

(2) how much local government funding has been allocated to each Millennium Landmark project; [66405]

(3) how much National Lottery money has been paid for architects' and consultants' fees for each of the Millennium Landmark projects to date; and what is the forecast total cost of each project. [65742]

Mr. Chris Smith: These are matters for the Millennium Commission. I shall reply to the hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission, and place copies of my reply in the Library of the House.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will ensure that Millennium Commission funding is made available to projects in each constituency; and if he will list those constituencies which have received funding to date. [65986]

Mr. Chris Smith: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I shall write to my hon. Friend in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission and place copies of my reply in the Library of the House.

British Film Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what grants are provided by his Department to aid development of the British film industry. [65989]

Janet Anderson: In December my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an increase in film support of at least £5.5 million over the next three years. The breakdown for 1999–2000 is as follows:

	£000
British Film Institute	16,910
British Screen Finance Ltd.	2,000
European Co-production Fund	2,000
British Film Commission	850
National Film and Television School	2,100
Audiovisual Eureka Secretariat and Audiovisual Observatory	393
European Media II	6,200
Other support to the film industry	556

My right hon. Friend also announced the creation of a new strategic body, British Film, which will be a Lottery distributor with its own percentage stream of Lottery money from the arts good cause—guaranteeing, for the first time, a dedicated share of Lottery resources for film. The percentage will be set to ensure British Film receives at least £27,000,000 each year from the Lottery; the figure may well be higher if the numbers playing the Lottery continue as at present.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid (Taxation)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how much the Legal Aid Board has paid to the Court Service or other providers for taxation of *(a)* criminal and *(b)* civil legal aid cases in the financial year ending April 1995 and in each succeeding financial year. [65664]

Mr. Hoon: No fees are payable from the legal aid fund to the Court Service or other providers for the determination of criminal legal aid bills. Information on the amount paid to the courts for taxation of costs in civil cases is not available as the Legal Aid Board does not record those fees separately.

Defence Case Payments

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to paragraph 35 of the explanatory notes to the Access of Justice Bill [Lords], by what percentage average payments to defence lawyers in the Crown courts increased between 1991–92 and 1997–98; and what was the reason for the size of the increase. [65668]

Mr. Hoon: Overall, between 1991–92 and 1997–98 average payments to lawyers in the Crown Court increased by 66 per cent. including disbursements, 63 per cent. excluding disbursements. Excluding the most exceptional cases, that is the top one per cent. of the most expensive cases, which may distort the overall figures, average payments to defence lawyers in the remaining 99 per cent. of cases increased by 82 per cent. compared with an inflation rate of 18 per cent. over the period. Among the reasons for the increase in average payments in those 99 per cent. of cases are fewer guilty pleas, resulting in more effective trials, and more work claimed per case by defence lawyers.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to paragraph 35 of the explanatory notes to the Access of Justice Bill [Lords], what was the increase in the average payments to defence lawyers in the Magistrates courts over the period 1991–92 to 1997–98; and what was the aggregate rate of inflation over the same period. [65667]

Mr. Hoon: Between 1991–92 and 1997–98 average payments to defence lawyers in the Magistrates Court increased by 11 per cent. inclusive of disbursements, or 12 per cent exclusive of disbursements. Over the same period the aggregate rate of inflation was 18 per cent. However, the introduction of Magistrates Court Standard Fees in June 1993 will have reduced the average payment because more individual payments are being made in respect of the same defendant. For example, payments in respect of Bail Act offences are now paid as a separate fee rather than being included in the payment for the case as a whole.

Bankrupt Legal Practitioners

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many practitioners who have been declared bankrupt are permitted to practise as barristers or solicitors in the courts. [65670]

Mr. Hoon: This is a matter for their professional bodies. Neither the Bar Council nor the Law Society have the requested figures readily available.

Legal Services Commission

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what estimate he has made of the administrative costs of the Community Legal Service in each of its first three years of operation; [65662]

(2) what estimate he has made of the administrative costs of the Criminal Defence Service in each of its first three years of operation. [65663]

Mr. Hoon: It is intended that the Legal Services Commission, which initially will administer both the Community Legal Service and the Criminal Defence Service, will be created on 1 January 2000. The administrative costs of the Commission from 1 January to the end of that financial year will be met from the Legal Aid Board's administration budget for the year 1999–2000, which is estimated at £62.4 million. In each of the next two years of its operation, it is estimated that the administrative costs of the Legal Services Commission will be £60.4 million. The Commission's administrative budget will thereafter be reviewed in the light of its workload under the reformed scheme.

Legal Aid (Expenditure)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to paragraph 35 of the explanatory notes to the Access to Justice Bill [Lords], what were the annual increases in expenditure on legal aid overall in each year from 1991–92 to 1997–98. [65665]

Mr. Hoon: The annual increase in each year was as follows:

Year	*£ million*	*Percentage*
1991–92	223	33
1992–93	188	21
1993–94	116	11
1994–95	89	7
1995–96	91	7
1996–97	86	6
1997–98	50	3

Generally, average payments continue to rise at a rate well above inflation. In the last year, for example, the average increase in all categories of legal aid exceeded the inflation rate of 3.3 per cent. and were as follows:

	Percentage
Civil	12.4
Criminal Higher	7.3
Criminal Magistrates	4.4
ABWOR	9.9
Duty Solicitor	4.6
Advice and Assistance	7.1

Graduated Fee Scheme

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the proportion of cases in the Crown courts in which legally aided defences were subject to the graduated fee scheme in each year between 1991–92 and 1997–98. [65669]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, as a proportion of total expenditure on Crown Court Advocates, and as a proportion of total claims submitted by Crown Court Advocates, the coverage of graduated fees, in 1996–97 and 1997–98, was as follows:

Graduated fees[1]	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Percentage of payments	0.57	59.61
Percentage of expenditure	0.14	24.09

[1] The Graduated Fee Scheme was introduced on 1 January 1997 and covers Crown Court Advocates only. It does not cover Crown Court Litigators.

Magistrates Courts (West Derbyshire)

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he received from Derbyshire Dales District Council about the closure of magistrates courts in West Derbyshire before he made his decision. [65438]

Mr. Hoon: I received nine representations from Derbyshire Dales District Council before a final decision was made to close the courthouses of Ashbourne, Bakewell and Matlock in West Derbyshire.

Civil and Family Case Payments

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to paragraph 35 of the explanatory notes to the Access to Justice Bill [*Lords*], by what percentage average payments in civil and family cases rose between 1991–92 and 1997–98; and what was the reason for the size of the increase. [65666]

Mr. Hoon: The percentage increase in average payments in each year, was as follows:

Year	*Percentage*
1991–92	10.8
1992–93	8.8
1993–94	7.8
1994–95	14.7
1995–96	10.1
1996–97	13.3
1997–98	12.4

There is no single factor which explains these increases. However, the main reason is growth in the amount of work claimed per case.

Conditional Fee Agreements

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the increased costs of litigation which will arise from the right of lawyers providing representation, pursuant to conditional fee agreements to uplift their costs by up to 100 per cent. in successful cases. [65671]

Mr. Hoon: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman is aware, the maximum uplift allowed in a conditional fee agreement was set at 100 per cent. by his noble and learned Friend Lord Mackay of Clashfern in 1995 in the Conditional Fees Order 1995. I am not aware of any assessment that was made at that time or before the figure was set. We shall be undertaking research and monitoring into the operation of conditional fees and to that end my officials have already begun discussing with the profession and other consumer and interest parties what form this research and monitoring may take.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many firms of insurers *(a)* from the United Kingdom and *(b)* from overseas have come forward with products to provide legal fees insurance under conditional fee agreements; and if he will list them. [65672]

Mr. Hoon: As I told the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *675*, insurance products to underpin conditional fee agreements have been available since July 1995 when conditional fee agreements first became lawful. It is an ever expanding market with new products coming into the market all the time. I am aware of at least eight providers of insurance to underpin conditional fees. I doubt that a comprehensive list exists or can be put together given the vibrant and expanding nature of this market.

Legal Aid (Asylum Seekers)

Mr. Forth: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what has been the total cost of providing legal aid to asylum seekers in *(a)* asylum cases, *(b)* criminal cases and *(c)* other cases in the past three years. [65467]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not available. The data collected by the Legal Aid Board and the courts do not identify separately applications made for legal aid by asylum seekers. However the amount paid out for Legal Advice and Assistance in respect of all Immigration and Nationality matters, over the last three years, was as follows:

Year	*£000*
1995–96	23,929
1996–97	26,146
1997–98	35,218

Judges' Interests

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has for the public registration of judges' interests; and if he will make a statement. [65866]

Mr. Hoon: There are at present no plans to provide for the public registration of judges' interests. However, in relation to the House of Lords in its judicial capacity, the Lord Chancellor has for the future requested the senior Law Lord, or the senior Law Lord in the chair, to ensure that at the time when any Committee is being composed, its proposed members will consider together whether any of their number might appear to be subject to a conflict of interest; and, in order to ensure the impartiality, and the appearance of impartiality of the Committee, to require any Law Lord to disclose any such circumstances to the parties and not sit if any party objects and the Committee so determines.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Homeless People

15. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to improve electoral registration levels among homeless people; and if he will make a statement. [64361]

Mr. George Howarth: The residence requirement which makes it difficult for homeless people to register is about to be reviewed by the Working Party on Electoral Procedures which I chair. The Working Party will be able to make detailed recommendations when it presents its final report to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary later this year.

Police Funding

16. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police forces received a per capita settlement for 1999–2000 larger than that for Lancashire. [64365]

Mr. Straw: Figures for total police force spending in 1999–2000 are not yet available as police authorities have yet to set their budgets. On the basis of provisional Government funding allocations for next year as announced by my right hon. Friend on 2 December 1998, *Official Report* columns 194–97 only 11 forces out of 43 will have a per capita settlement greater than Lancashire.

Immigration Advisers

17. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to introduce plans to regulate immigration advisers and solicitors. [64366]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have a manifesto commitment to control unscrupulous immigration advisers whether legally qualified or not. We will introduce legislation shortly.

24. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what evidence he has received of poor professional standards among certain immigration advisers and solicitors. [64373]

35. **Mr. Fitzpatrick:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what evidence he has received of poor professional standards among certain immigration advisers and solicitors. [64384]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have received many representations from Members of Parliament as well as evidence from other sources about incompetent or unscrupulous immigration advisers. The Government will regulate advisers in the forthcoming Immigration and Asylum Bill.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take action to regulate immigration advisers. [64363]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Yes. The Government have a manifesto commitment to control unscrupulous immigration advisers. We will introduce legislations shortly.

Young Offenders

19. **Mr. Corbett:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he is making in achieving his target of halving the time between young offenders committing an offence and appearing in court. [64368]

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress is being made in halving the time between serious youth offenders committing a crime and appearing in court. [64357]

Mr. Boateng: In 1996 the average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders was 142 days. We are committed to halving that time by March 2002. We took early action on coming to office to begin the process of change.

There are now over 150 fast tracking schemes in operation covering almost half of all courts in England and Wales. Provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 were brought into force on 30 September last year to enable the courts to manage cases more quickly and efficiently. Other measures are currently being piloted with national implementation planned for October this year.

The Government have set demanding performance targets for all stages of proceedings up to and after trial and for all youth justice agencies.

Probation Service

20. **Mrs. Brinton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the future of the Probation Service. [64369]

Mr. George Howarth: "Joining Forces to Protect the Public" was published on 6 August 1998, and sought views on our plans for modernising the probation services in England and Wales. Also relevant are our proposals set out in the consultation paper, "Support Services in Family Proceedings—Future Organisation of Court Welfare Services", which was published on 30 July. We are now carefully considering the replies received, and expect to announce decisions about the future organisation of these services soon.

Access to Justice Bill

21. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he last had discussions with the Lord Chancellor and the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department, about the consequences of the Access to Justice Bill [*Lords*] for the Home Office's criminal justice policy. [64370]

Mr. Boateng: I share responsibility for criminal justice policy with my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor and my right hon. and Learned Friend the Attorney-General, and relevant matters (including the Access to Justice Bill) are regularly discussed between us. The Bill incorporates a number of measures which are designed to contribute to the Government's policy of making the criminal justice system more efficient and effective.

Channel Islands

22. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the administrators in the Channel Islands about their constitutional position. [64371]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Williams of Mostyn had discussions on 16 October last year with representatives of the Channel Islands about their constitutional position, with particular reference to the European Union Code of Conduct on Business Taxation.

Voter Participation

23. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on work planned by his Department to encourage higher voter participation in the *(a)* local and *(b)* European elections this year. [64372]

Mr. George Howarth: Local elections are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Several interested organisations are running publicity campaigns for the elections to the European Parliament. In the light of this, we are currently considering how to make the best use of any funds which the Government may be able to provide for voter education purposes.

Youth Crime

25. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he is making in tackling youth crime; and if he will make a statement. [64374]

Mr. Boateng: The Crime and Disorder Act, which received Royal Assent in July 1998, included a number of new measures to tackle youth crime; other measures to establish youth offender panels are within the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill currently before Parliament.

The Government are currently piloting new measures in the Crime and Disorder Act, including the final warning scheme, new community-based court disposals, and youth offending teams with national implementation planned for around April 2000.

To date the Government have also introduced a range of measures to speed up the youth justice system, and have established the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales which will provide advice on the operation and performance of the youth justice system.

Tagging Schemes

26. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the pilot tagging schemes. [64375]

Mr. George Howarth: Research into the first two years of the pilot schemes of curfew orders enforced by electronic monitoring under the Criminal Justice Act 1991 has been published in Home Office Research Study 163 and 177. Further research into the first two years of the trials is due to be published this year. The other trials of court based electronic monitoring schemes are to be evaluated this year.

Firearms (Compensation)

27. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the efficiency with which compensatory payments on now-illegal firearms are being made. [64376]

Mr. Boateng: Payments are being made as quickly and efficiently as possible, having regard to the range and complexity of the compensation schemes, and the need for proper scrutiny of claims to ensure propriety and prevent fraud.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current estimate for the completion of option C claims under the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997. [65585]

Mr. Boateng: The aim is to make offers of payment on the remaining Option C claims by the end of March.

I outlined the measures we are taking to speed the processing of these compensation claims in my reply to the hon. Member for Tewksbury (Mr. Robertson) on 28 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *179–80*.

Sunday Dancing

28. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received regarding Sunday dancing. [64377]

Mr. George Howarth: The British Entertainment and Discotheque Association met me on 16 December 1998 to press the case for relaxing the present restrictions. I also received some letters from members of the public both for and against change. I hope to announce the outcome of my consideration shortly.

Police (Early Retirement)

29. **Mr. Salter:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he plans to reduce the proportion of early retirements from the police. [64378]

Mr. Boateng: Following our consultation document of last year on police pension arrangements, work is in hand on detailed proposals to improve practice in managing ill-health retirement and to support good management practice with changes to the Police Pensions Regulations where necessary. We plan to publish our proposals in the early part of this year. They will be published in advance of implementation to allow for full consultation with the interested parties.

31. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which police authority had *(a)* the highest and *(b)* the lowest rate of early retirement through sickness in the last year for which figures are available. [64380]

Mr. Boateng: In 1997–98 Derbyshire Constabulary had the highest rate of ill-health retirement among police forces in England and Wales, at 65% of all retirements. Surrey Police had the lowest, at 14% of all retirements.

Crime Reduction

32. **Siobhain McDonagh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he last met local authority representatives to discuss initiatives to reduce offending rates in areas of high crime. [64381]

Mr. Straw: As a matter of course, Ministers and officials regularly meet representatives from a wide variety of interests, including local government. We have been grateful for the help given, for example, in the production of the guidance for statutory local crime and disorder partnerships, and in respect of anti-social behaviour orders which will come into force on 1 April 1999.

My Department recently commissioned "Reducing Neighbourhood Crime: a manual for action" from Crime Concern. It provides practical advice for local partners, including local authorities, representatives of which made a valuable contribution to its production.

Under-age Drinking

33. **Mrs. Humble:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning links between under-age drinking and anti-social behaviour in town centres. [64382]

Mr. Boateng: The public, police officers and local councillors have all indicated that alcohol-related crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour are a significant problem and do involve under-age drinkers.

We have implemented the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997 and will legislate to clarify the law relating to adults who buy alcohol for children and to the use of children in test purchases. The Anti-Social Behaviour Order and other provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 will help with specific local problems.

The police and local authorities will be able to target local problems through the crime reduction strategies required by the Crime and Disorder Act.

Victim Support

34. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the support provided by his Department for victims of crime. [64383]

Mr. Boateng: The Home Office provides a grant of £12.7 million to the voluntary organisation, Victim Support, to deliver front line services to victims of crime. In 1997–98 such services were offered to more than 1.1 million victims. In 1998–99, a grant was given for the first time to another voluntary organisation, Support After Murder and Manslaughter, to assist the complementary work it carries out with the relatives and friends of homicide victims. In addition, the Home Office produces and distributes an information pack for the friends and relatives of homicide victims and a number of information leaflets for victims and witnesses.

The Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill, which was introduced on 3 December 1998, will provide greater protection for vulnerable or intimidated witnesses, including victims, and assist them to give their best evidence. The measures in the Bill are based on the recommendations in the "Speaking Up for Justice" report which was published last year. The Government have established an inter-departmental group to take forward the implementation of the recommendations in the report, including the measures in the Bill.

Deportation Orders

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deportation orders have been made in the last six months but have not yet been executed. [64353]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Between 1 June and 30 November 1998, 558 deportation orders were made, 431 have yet to be given effect. During the same period 330 people were deported, 203 of them on the strength of deportation orders made before 1 June.

The removal of Immigration Offenders and failed asylum seekers is at record levels, 9 per cent. above 1997, which itself was 22 per cent. higher than 1996.

Witnesses (Intimidation)

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he will introduce to protect witnesses and victims from being intimidated against giving evidence. [64367]

Mr. Boateng: The Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill, introduced on 3 December 1998, includes a range of practical measures to protect vulnerable or intimidated witnesses and assist them to give their best evidence. These were recommended in the report of the Working Group on Vulnerable or Intimidated Witnesses which we published for consultation last June. The

implementation of these measures, together with those recommendations which do not require legislation will be taken forward by an Interdepartmental Steering Group which has already started work.

Probation Service (Cornwall and Devon)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the proposed merger of the probation services for Cornwall and Devon. [64379]

Mr. George Howarth: The consultation document "Joining Forces to Protect the Public", published on 6 August 1998, included proposals to align probation area boundaries with police force area boundaries, which would mean combining the Devon and Cornwall probation areas. We are now carefully considering the replies received, including that from the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell, and expect to announce decisions about the future organisation of these services soon.

Fire Services (Pensions)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to bring forward proposals concerning the underfunding of pensions in the *(a)* London and *(b)* other fire services. [65500]

Mr. George Howarth: We announced, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review in July, that fire authorities in England would get an increase in the fire service element of total standard spending of £143.6 million—an average annual increase of 3.5 per cent.—over the next three years, including £47.1 million (3.6 per cent) for 1999–2000. The Review recognised future funding pressures, including pensions, but we have also deliberately set challenging efficiency targets for the fire service, as for other key public services.

As part of the provisional local government finance settlement for 1999–2000, we made changes to the fire standard spending assessment distribution formula, which will help those authorities which are facing the highest potential liabilities for pensions. Under the provisional settlement, London's fire standard spending assessment would be increased by 3.8 per cent. for 1999–2000.

We are considering the responses to the consultation document on the review of the firefighters' pension scheme and expect to come forward with proposals in the coming months.

Police Disability Entitlements

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to extend police disability entitlements to special constables injured while carrying out their duties; [65497]

(2) how many special constables in the Metropolitan Police area were forced to retire from police work due to disability resulting from injuries sustained in the line of duty in each of the last five years; [65496]

(3) what representations he has received regarding the provision of disability pensions and entitlements for former special constables forced to retire from police work due to injuries sustained in the line of duty. [65498]

Mr. Boateng: Arrangements to compensate special constables who are injured on duty are contained in the Special Constables Regulations. The 1995–96 Special Constabulary Working Group reviewed these arrangements and recommended a number of improvements. Proposals for new regulations were circulated to the police staff associations, the Association of Police Authorities and the special constabularies in December 1997. As a result, representations were received from:

Association of Chief Police Officers
Police Superintendents' Association
Police Federation
Association of Police Authorities
Bedfordshire Police
Cleveland Police
Derbyshire Constabulary
Special Constabulary Conferences of the North West, North East and Midlands Regions
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

New regulations are currently being drafted and will shortly be copied to the relevant bodies for any final comments. We expect the new regulations to come into force on 1 July 1999.

In the last five years, only two special constables retired from the Metropolitan Special Constabulary as a result of disabling injuries sustained on duty. One in 1993–94 and the other in 1994–95.

Copies of the Working Group's report and the consultation paper of December 1997 have been placed in the Library.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the timetable for dealing with the cases of *(a)* pre-13 July 1993 asylum applicants and *(b)* 1 July 1993 to 31 December 1995 asylum applicants. [65568]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Work is now starting on the applications lodged before July 1993 and we expect to have completed most of them by May 1999. Work is about to start on the outstanding applications lodged between July 1993 and December 1995 and it is our aim to have resolved these during the financial year 1999–2000.

Police Vehicles (Accidents)

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many accidents involving police vehicles in England and Wales have been referred to the Police Complaints Authority in each year since 1990. [65657]

Mr. Boateng: The information has been provided by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA).

The Police Complaints Authority has a statutory obligation to supervise the investigation of complaints involving death or serious injury. It also has discretion to

supervise any other complaint investigation where, in its view, the public interest makes it appropriate. A police force may also voluntarily refer a matter. If no complaint is made by a member of the public, then the referral of the case remains a decision for the force concerned.

Prior to 1993, PCA statistics did not separately identify the supervision of investigations into deaths involving police vehicles. In the calendar year 1993, the Authority supervised investigations into eight cases involving seven deaths. From 1 January 1994 to 31 March 1995 (when statistical recording changed from calendar to financial year) 16 investigations into deaths associated with police vehicles were supervised by the Authority. 12 of those involved some form of pursuit. In 1995–96 it supervised 27 such investigations with 21 involving police pursuit. In 1997–98 29 investigations were supervised and 9 of those involved pursuit.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each police area in England and Wales how many road traffic accidents have occurred whilst police vehicles are in pursuit of another vehicle since 1990. [65656]

Mr. Boateng: Figures are not available centrally in exactly the categories requested, as statistics collate pursuit accidents with those arising from immediate responses to emergency call. Collection procedures changed in 1993 to include all police vehicle accidents on the roads. These range from minor-damage-only incidents to serious ones involving injury or death. The information set out in the table has been provided by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, to which forces submit statistical returns.

Police accidents during pursuits and emergency responses: forces in England and Wales

	1993	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*Total*
Avon and Somerset	205	170	260	229	184	1,048
Bedfordshire	34	20	60	93	83	290
Cambridgeshire	38	50	80	107	123	398
Cheshire	114	73	101	102	[1]—	390
City of London	11	14	11	19	13	68
Cleveland	28	108	39	22	39	336
Cumbria	40	29	39	19	20	147
Derbyshire	17	58	74	96	84	329
Devon and Cornwall	29	53	110	64	93	349
Dorset	50	54	130	56	44	334
Durham	94	105	100	73	33	405
Dyfed-Powys	9	20	5	19	9	62
Essex	12	[1]—	38	93	[1]—	143
Gloucestershire	8	[1]—	5	91	61	165
Greater Manchester	493	426	539	[1]—	195	1,653
Gwent	1	9	[1]—	38	57	105
Hampshire	86	115	106	161	78	546
Hertfordshire	18	10	42	75	55	200
Humberside	79	69	48	37	66	299
Kent	13	27	99	180	138	457
Lancashire	55	72	89	85	53	354
Leicestershire	67	71	77	78	30	323
Lincolnshire	12	28	40	36	26	142
Merseyside	216	225	244	135	119	939
Metropolitan Police	2,009	1,995	2,578	1,308	1,422	9,312
Norfolk	65	46	46	45	36	238
Northamptonshire	64	71	69	68	43	315
Northumbria	325	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	180	505
North Wales	31	36	27	22	9	125
North Yorkshire	81	68	51	48	51	299
Nottinghamshire	185	161	208	135	141	830
South Wales	139	[1]—	37	79	104	359
South Yorkshire	23	150	114	98	139	524
Staffordshire	91	72	148	156	142	609
Suffolk	7	31	21	21	4	84
Surrey	93	122	108	125	55	503
Sussex	25	41	23	140	138	367
Thames Valley	404	327	346	398	394	1,869
Warwickshire	8	33	54	46	41	182
West Mercia	58	93	60	55	49	315
West Midlands	258	258	306	295	291	1,408
West Yorkshire	131	49	53	15	[1]—	248
Wiltshire	61	27	26	10	23	147

[1] Show no force return submitted

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers in England and Wales have been involved in road traffic accidents whilst involved in car chases in each year since 1990; and how many such accidents have resulted in injury or fatality to *(a)* police officers, *(b)* those being pursued and *(c)* other members of the public. [65655]

Mr. Boateng: Figures are not available centrally in all the categories requested. The information has been provided by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, to which forces submit statistical returns. It includes both police pursuits and immediate responses to emergency calls.

Police pursuits and emergency responses—fatalities and injuries

	Police			Civilian	
Year	*Fatality*	*Serious injury*	*Other injury*	*Fatality*	*Serious injury*	*Other injury*
1990	1	143	[1]—	23	174	[1]—
1991	2	101	[1]—	30	170	[1]—
1992	2	112	[1]—	28	188	[1]—
1993	5	113	[1]—	29	187	[1]—
1994–95	2	53	1,036	19	56	685
1995–96	4	90	1,012	17	123	944
1996–97	0	100	979	15	107	744
1997–98	0	105	1,134	15	94	764

[1] Not available

Crowd Policing (Charges)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what circumstances police authorities are permitted to charge promoters for the costs of crowd policing outside *(a)* sporting events and *(b)* entertainment events. [65489]

Mr. Boateng: It is for chief officers of police to decide when to charge for providing a police service. However, under Home Office guidelines, no charge should normally be made for officers deployed on the public highway outside sporting or entertainment venues.

Sexual and Violent Offenders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in how many cases periods of extended supervision for sexual and violent offenders were imposed under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 between 30 September and 31 December 1998. [65567]

Mr. Boateng: These provisions were commenced on 30 September 1998. Information about extended sentences is being collected on the Home Office court proceedings database but will not be available until the autumn of this year.

Child Curfews

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many local child curfew schemes were made by local authorities under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 between 30 September and 31 December 1998. [65566]

Mr. Boateng: The relevant provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which enable local authorities to establish a local child curfew scheme, were brought into force on 30 September 1998. Home Office guidance on the operation of these new powers was issued on 29 September 1998. Before imposing a local child curfew, local authorities, in consultation with the chief officer of police and such other persons or bodies that it considers appropriate, must first draw up proposals for a local child curfew scheme, including arrangements for consultation with the residents in the area in which the curfew is to apply, and submit these to the Secretary of State for approval.

No applications for local child curfew schemes have been received at this early stage. Local child curfew schemes are designed to be part of an integrated response to reducing crime and disorder in local areas. In considering their potential use, local authorities will wish to take into account the wider crime and disorder reduction strategies, also required under the Crime and Disorder Act, which are currently being developed.

Euthanasia

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many hospitals are currently the subject of police investigations into cases of alleged euthanasia; and if he will list them. [65570]

Mr. Boateng: The investigation of alleged offences is an operational matter for chief officers of police and information is not collected centrally on the number or type of investigations being conducted by the police.

Horses (Mineworking)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning horses working underground in coal and mineral mining; and if he will make a statement. [65490]

Mr. George Howarth: This Department has received 10 letters and a petition.

The Coal and Other Mines (Horses) Regulations 1956 set out the requirements about the use of horses and ponies in mines. The Mines Inspectorate of the Health and Safety Executive, which is responsbile for enforcing the legislation, have found no evidence of the maltreatment of any horses and ponies used in mines.

Criminal Conviction Certificates

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of criminal conviction certificates which will be issued per year; and what plans he has to introduce a code of practice governing the use of such certificates. [65965]

Mr. Boateng: We estimate that there will be between 5 million and 6 million conviction certificates issued each year. Under section 122 of the Police Act 1997, a code of practice for registered bodies (which will be entitled to receive copies of enhanced criminal record certificates and criminal record certificates) will be developed in consultation with interested parties. In the case of criminal conviction certificates, it will be for the individual concerned to decide to whom to provide the information contained in them. We shall, however, consult about guidance to employers.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether it is Government policy to encourage the use of the criminal conviction certificate in the assessment of candidates for employment. [65966]

Mr. Boateng: No. It will be up to individual employers to decide whether to ask to see a criminal convictions certificate. Criminal conviction certificates will only give details of unspent convictions. This is information which applicants can be asked to disclose at the moment. The criminal conviction certificate will allow employers to be sure that the information they have been given is full and accurate.

Chevening House

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of providing police protection at Chevening House, Kent in the last year for which figures are available; and what is the additional daily cost when the Foreign Secretary is in residence. [66007]

Mr. Straw: It is established Government practice not to disclose the actual cost of protecting an individual. If the costs of protection were revealed, it would be possible to estimate the scale of protection and that would prejudice the security of the individual. For the same reason, we are unable to disclose details of protection provided.

Visa Renewal

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning the time taken to process applications for the renewal of visas for foreign nationals currently living in the United Kingdom; and what steps he has taken to reduce the time. [65728]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regularly receive representations concerning the time taken to process such applications. The introduction of compulsory application forms for most immigration applications has enabled a large number of straightforward applications to be decided quickly. The current computerisation and restructuring of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's caseworking functions is intended to speed up caseworking times. This restructuring is now underway and, until it is completed and the new structures have settled down, the major upheaval involved will inevitably affect processing times.

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will exempt adult volunteers working in youth organisations from paying the fee required by the Criminal Records Bureau for checks on full-time employees working with young people. [65871]

Mr. Boateng: We considered very carefully whether there was any way in which free checks could be provided for volunteers. Whilst we acknowledge the valuable contribution volunteers make, we have concluded that it will not be practicable to provide any free checks from the Criminal Records Bureau for volunteers or for any other groups. We realise that this is unwelcome news, but providing free checks would prove an unsustainable burden on the public purse, and may increase demand for certificates from the Bureau to an uncontrollable extent. In addition, we do not consider it would be fair to allow volunteers to have free certificates when there are other equally deserving groups such as the unemployed or the disabled. The cost of the fees for certificates from the Bureau will be kept to the minimum necessary to recoup costs.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he has made in reducing the replication of animal experiments already undertaken. [64364]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 19 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *387*. Whilst some replication of experiments is needed to ensure the reliability of previous research, the Inspectorate will not recommend that a licence be granted unless there are good reasons for replicating work already undertaken.

In regulatory toxicology, we are currently encouraging regulatory authorities and testers to make full use of reduction, refinement and replacement alternatives, including the possibility of data sharing, in order to reduce the need for animal tests.

In the wider context, all establishments will be required to maintain ethical review processes from 1 April. One of the roles of these processes will be to review proposed and ongoing work to ensure it is fully justified.

Special Constables (Injuries Compensation)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements are made for compensation by single payment or pension for special constables injured in the course of their duties. [65751]

Mr. Boateng: Arrangements to compensate special constables who are injured on duty are contained in the Special Constables Regulations. In brief, a gratuity and a pension is payable in the event of:

death;

permanent disability leading to complete inability to work;

and

permanent disability leading to inability to continue ordinary employment

In addition, a special constable who loses remuneration from private employment in consequence of an injury is entitled to actual loss of pay for a maximum of 28 weeks.

Following recommendations made by the 1995–96 Special Constabulary Working Group, new regulations are currently being drafted which will extend the circumstances in which injured specials will qualify for compensation. These will be laid before Parliament later this year and we expect them to come into force on 1 July 1999.

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the current system of criminal injuries compensation in so far as it relates to sexual offences; and if he will make a statement. [65923]

Mr. Boateng: We have been reviewing the criminal injuries compensation scheme in the light of the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and are considering whether any changes to the scheme might be necessary or desirable. That consideration includes the awards for injuries resulting from sexual offences. We hope to be able to announce shortly how we intend to carry this forward.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total amount paid in compensation for loss of earnings by the CICA and the CICB for each year from 1990 to the present. [65924]

Mr. Boateng: The Criminal Injuries Compensation Board advise that there is no data to distinguish loss of earnings from other elements of compensation paid in respect of claims settled by them under the scheme based on common law damages. The approach was often to make an inclusive award which encompassed a loss of earnings element, but which did not quantify it precisely.

The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority advise that under the tariff-based scheme, introduced with effect from 1 April 1996, the amount of compensation paid for loss of earnings is as follows:

Year	£
1996–97	22,470
1997–98	351,013
April to December 1998	1,735,886

These figures reflect the increase in claims ready for settlement from the scheme's introduction.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of successful applicants for criminal injuries compensation received compensation for loss of earnings from the CICA, having been absent from work for at least 28 weeks, in each year from 1996 to 1998. [65926]

Mr. Boateng: The percentage of all successful claims settled by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority which have included a loss of earnings element is as follows:

Year	*Percentage*
1996–97	0.08
1997–98	0.29
April to December 1998	0.69

These figures substantially under-represent the percentage likely to result from a more representative cohort of settled claims once the new scheme has fully bedded in.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average time taken to settle claims for criminal injuries compensation by the CICA and its predecessor the CICB in each year from 1990 to the present. [65925]

Mr. Boateng: There are no meaningful average waiting times for settling claims for criminal injuries compensation. Claims under the scheme vary greatly in their complexity. They range from straightforward ones, in which a decision may be issued within a matter of weeks, to exceptionally complex cases where, for example, the medical diagnosis or prognosis is uncertain, and where therefore, it may take a number of years for the injury to be fully and fairly assessed. Interim payments are usually made in such cases to assist the victim in the shorter term.

The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA) and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB) advise that—if cases at the extremes are discounted—the average time to issue a first decision under the 1990 scheme (administered by the CICB) was about nine months. Under the tariff scheme (administered by the CICA), the average time is about seven months.

Burglars (Sentencing)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what resources he plans to make available to prisons to deal with the implications of his proposals for tougher sentences for burglars. [65802]

Mr. Boateng: The latest long-term projections for the Prison Service are lower than had previously been the case. I therefore, expect the Prison Service to be able to accommodate the extra places within existing provision at least for the next three years.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimates his Department has made of the impact on prison numbers of his proposed tougher sentences for burglars. [65803]

Mr. Boateng: The Home Office estimates that minimum sentences of three years for those convicted for a third time of domestic burglar will add between 4,000 and 4,400 to the prison population over 10 years. The build up will be gradual because the new provision applies only when all the offences are committed after implementation (in December 1999) and one of the two previous offences was committed after the offender had been convicted of the other.

Prisoners (Medical Examinations and Assessments)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost has been of transporting and securing prisoners from HM prisons to NHS hospitals for medical examinations since 1 May 1997. [65748]

Mr. George Howarth: Any such arrangements would be made locally by the prison concerned. Financial information in this form is not recorded centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Police Manpower (Wales)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many whole-time equivalent police officers were stationed in each constabulary in Wales on *(a)* 30 April 1997, *(b)* 30 April 1998 and *(c)* 31 October 1998. [66372]

Mr. Boateng: Information on police numbers is collected at the end of March and September. The statistics for the period requested are set out in the table:

Force	31 March 1997	31 March 1998	30 September 1998[1]
Dyfed-Powys	1,005	1,002	1,013
Gwent	1,243	1,233	1,254
North Wales	1,369	1,396	1,395
South Wales	2,976	2,986	2,946
Wales total	6,593	6,617	6,608

[1] Police numbers are provisional

Involuntary Manslaughter

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to legislate on the recommendations of the Law Commission, Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter. [65187]

Mr. Boateng: The Government value greatly the work of the Law Commission. The recommendations on involuntary manslaughter and corporate killing contained in their report no. 237 "Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter" raise some difficult and complex issues.

An inter-departmental working group, which includes a member of the Law Commission, is actively considering these issues. Once we have their conclusions we will consider how to take the Law Commission's proposals forward.

Lord and Lady Hoffman

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he knew of Lord Hoffman's and Lady Hoffman's involvement with Amnesty International when he announced his decision regarding the extradition of General Pinochet. [65089]

Mr. Straw: I explained in the reasons for my decision to issue an authority to proceed on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *213–17*, that I had not accepted a representation made on behalf of Senator Pinochet that I should disregard the House of Lords' judgment on the grounds of alleged bias on the part of one of the Law Lords.

It was not for me, as Home Secretary, to question the basis on which the House of Lords has come to a particular decision.

PRIME MINISTER

BBC (Iraq Coverage)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if it was with his authority that his spokesman contacted the BBC to express disquiet about the BBC's handling of the Iraq conflict; and if he will make a statement. [65381]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 13 January 1999]:* Yes. The Government were concerned to ensure that the British public were provided with factual and balanced reporting of Operation Desert Fox. Journalists reporting from Baghdad were, and are, subject to considerable restrictions on access and information. It was particularly important, therefore, that live coverage of and commentary on Operation Desert Fox from Iraq should explain, and take account of, such restrictions. This was made clear to media representatives, including in the BBC, on a number of occasions.

Bahrain

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had with the Bahraini Head of State about *(a)* democracy and *(b)* human and civil rights in that country during his recent meeting; and if he will make a statement. [65914]

The Prime Minister: I met the Prime Minister of Bahrain on 5 January 1999.

Our conversation focused on recent events in the region, particularly Iraq. I took the opportunity to thank the Prime Minister for Bahrain's continued practical and political support. Human rights were not raised on this occasion.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he has had with the Russian Prime Minister about his statement concerning the bombardment of Iraq. [65387]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* I sent a message to Prime Minister Primakov explaining our policy on Iraq. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was in close touch with his Russian counterpart during and after operation Desert Fox. We are now working with the Russians and other Security Council members to find a way forward.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will seek to hold discussions with the Government of Iran about the consequences of military action against Iraq for the strength of the position of Saddam Hussein. [66465]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was in contact with his Iranian counterpart during Operation Desert Fox. Bilateral discussions continue at official level.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister when he will reply to the letter from the Religious Society of Friends in Britain of 17 December concerning military action against Iraq. [65473]

The Prime Minister: My Office has no record of having received this letter.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister for what reasons he agreed to the decision to act quickly against Iraq before the period of Ramadan. [65389]

The Prime Minister: I told the House on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 607–23, that I would have no hesitation in ordering the use of force once again if Iraq failed to live up to its undertaking to afford UN weapons inspectors full co-operation in every respect. The

Executive Chairman of UNSCOM was asked to report on Iraq's co-operation over the month that followed. He delivered his report on 15 December 1998 and its conclusions were unequivocal. Iraq had failed to co-operate fully with UNSCOM and had even introduced new restrictions. My decision to authorise military action was taken on that basis.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister when he was consulted by the United States about its decision to bomb Iraq. [65390]

The Prime Minister: We were in close contact with the Americans on all aspects of policy towards Iraq, before, during and after military action. The decision to launch Operation Desert Fox was a joint one.

Honours Lists

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Prime Minister how many United Kingdom nominations his office received for New Year and Birthday Honours in 1998; and how many United Kingdom honours were awarded in *(a)* the 1998 Birthday List and *(b)* the 1999 New Year List. [65905]

The Prime Minister: In 1998 the Nominations Unit received 3,500 new honours nominations from members of the public and my office received some 4,000 nominations from Departments (most proposed by national bodies, associations and voluntary organisations) for consideration in the 1998 Honours Lists. The number of awards in my Honours List covering the whole range of activities in the United Kingdom made at *(a)* Birthday 1998 and at *(b)* New Year 1999 was 983. In both Lists, over 40 per cent. of the awards resulted from nominations made by members of the public. However, as it takes up to a year, and in some cases longer, for nominations to be fully validated and assessed, it is not possible to relate the number of nominations received in any one year to the number of candidates considered for particular Honours Lists.

Overseas Visits

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list those occasions since 1 May 1997 when he has visited New York, listing his mode of transport to and from the United Kingdom. [66363]

The Prime Minister: I have visited New York on two occasions since 1 May 1997. I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) on 25 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns *250–51*, and to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) on 19 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *914*. On both occasions I travelled by commercial aircraft.

Eurocorps

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Prime Minister if the Government endorsed at the Heads of Government meeting at Portschach the principle of the United Kingdom joining Eurocorps. [66427]

The Prime Minister: No. We have no plans for the United Kingdom to join Eurocorps.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

BBC (Iraq Coverage)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with the BBC concerning the BBC's handling of the Iraq conflict; and if he will make a statement. [65646]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence today, *Official Report*, column *310*.

Yemen

Mr. Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the British Consul in Yemen has been allowed to see the fifth British national detained; and if he will make a statement on the role of the Foreign Office regarding the detention of the five British nationals. [66089]

Mr. Robin Cook: Our Consul-General had access on 14 January to the fifth British detainee, Malek Nasser Harhara (to whom access has been denied on the grounds that he is a Yemen/British dual national). Mr. Harhara said that he was in satisfactory health and had not been physically abused.

The Consul-General had called on three of the detainees on 8 January. All three looked in reasonable condition. Of these, one detainee, Sarnad Ahmed, said that he had been tortured in the week after his arrest on 24 December 1998, but that his treatment had improved since then. The Consul-General reported that he appeared now to be in good health.

I made clear to the Yemeni Prime Minister on 11 January my concern about the allegation of torture. Dr. Iryani said that only one of the detainees had complained. He had investigated the issue personally. If the claim were found to be true, whoever was responsible would be prosecuted. Dr. Iryani assured me that the detainees would be properly treated.

A second detainee, Shahid Butt, told our Consul-General that, in the week since his arrest of 24 December 1998, he had been hit once or twice and slapped, and made to sign a paper. The Consul-General reported that he looked fit and well. He complained that there was no light in his cell at night and that he could not go to the toilet when he asked, and about the number of mosquitoes.

The third detainee, Gulam Hussain, looked in good condition. The Consul-General checked carefully that he had no problems with his back or with his asthma, two pre-existing medical conditions.

On 9 January 1999, the Consul-General saw Mohssin Ghailan, another of the detainees. He said that his treatment was now normal. He added that he had been slapped in the week after his arrest, but not since then. Mohssin also said that he was concerned about a possible liver problem, and was in some pain. The Consul-General noticed that his skin was yellowish, but could not judge the significance, not knowing his normal complexion.

Our Consul-General made representations, on behalf of the detainees whom he saw, which resulted in the provision of reading material, washing material, extra

food, greater freedom within prison and greater access to the toilet. He also received an assurance of medical treatment for Mohssin Ghailan.

I spoke again to the Prime Minister of Yemen on 14 January 1999. I welcomed the fact that we had had access to Mr. Harhara. I repeated my concern that all the detainees should be charged or released. I also pressed for access to the detainees for their defence lawyer, and for an independent doctor. Dr. Iryani took note, and undertook to work for a positive response to these requests.

Since then, the lawyer representing the detainees, Mr. Basunaid, has informed us that charges have been laid. The detainees have been charged with association with armed groups planning to commit murder, explosions and destruction and with the possession of weapons, under Article 133 of the Yemeni Penal Code. The case is, therefore, sub judice.

Our Ambassador and Consul-General continue to press for access to the detainees for Mr. Basunaid and for an independent doctor. They are also pressing for further consular visits, including to Mr. Harhara, and for transfer to the central prison in Aden where conditions are better. Mr. Basunaid has, however, been told by the Yemeni authorities that he must await the end of the Eid holiday before seeing his clients.

The Embassy and Mr. Basunaid are in close touch about all issues relating to the case, including about the allegations that the detainees may have been forced to confess. In the light of our contacts with Mr. Basunaid, we will consider whether to make representations to the Yemeni authorities about the conduct of the investigation.

Mr. Gerald Bull

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what bilateral discussions there have been between the Belgian and UK Governments concerning evidence being given by Mr. Stephen Kock, Colonel Hardy, Colonel Jack and Mr. Blane to the Belgian inquiry into the death of Mr. Gerald Bull. [65147]

Ms Quin: None. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my predecessor, the then Minister with responsibility for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on 21 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *528*.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice Her Majesty's Government have given since 1989 to former directors of ASTRA about giving evidence to the Belgian police on the death of Mr. Gerald Bull. [65148]

Ms Quin: No such advice has been given.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have taken place between his Department and the Belgian Government on arrangements for cooperation over the Belgian Government's inquiry into the murder of Mr. Gerald Bull. [65146]

Ms Quin: There have been no such discussions.

UK Democratic and Governmental Structures (Council of Europe Study)

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish the results of the examination of the United Kingdom's democratic and Governmental structures which was carried out by the Council of Europe from June 1996 onwards. [65326]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Secretary General's overview of the functioning and protection of democratic institutions in all Council of Europe member states remains before the Committee of Ministers which will resume its discussions at its next monitoring meeting in March 1999.

The conclusions of the Committee of Ministers will be made public when available.

Defence Contracts (Malaysia)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the officials in his Department who met Mr. Stephen Kock to discuss matters relating to defence contracts with Malaysia in the period from January 1985 to the end of December 1988. [65145]

Mr. Fatchett: We have not been able to find any reference in our files to meetings between Mr. Kock and members of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office during this period.

Butler Report

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the French Foreign Minister about the latter's statement concerning the Butler report. [65391]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met the French Foreign Minister in Paris on 8 January 1999 and had a full discussion on all aspects of Iraq policy.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Democracy)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to promote democracy in *(a)* Saudi Arabia and *(b)* Kuwait. [65474]

Mr. Fatchett: We seek to encourage constitutional development and greater participatory government in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait through a variety of means, including official and parliamentary contacts, ministerial visits and informal dialogue on democratic issues.

Chechnya

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was discussed at the meeting which took place between Foreign Office officials and Granger Telecom personnel in August 1998. [66111]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Foreign Office officials dealing with the kidnap of Jon James and Camilla Carr in the Russian Republic of Chechnya met two Weybridge-based Granger Telecom managers at FCO request on 21 August 1998. The Carr/James kidnap was then into its 13th month.

Officials explained that their lengthy capacity illustrated the dangers of operating in Chechnya and asked if Granger had any information which might help to secure the release of Carr and James, given that the UK has no diplomatic representations in Chechnya. The answer was no. Granger described the terms and funding of their contract with a Chechen private company, ChechenTelecom, to establish a telecommunications infrastructure in Chechnya, and said that ChechenTelecom assumed full responsibility for the security of Granger expatriate staff in Grozny. FCO officials said that HM Government could not encourage UK humanitarian assistance or investment in Chechnya.

At the meeting FCO officials showed to Granger the FCO travel advice of 18 August 1998, which states:

"We strongly advise against travel to the Chechen Republic, Ingushetia, Dagestan, North Ossetia and the Stravropol/Chechnya border, because of the unstable security situation. Visitors have been kidnapped in these areas recently".

Sierra Leone

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance was given to the United Kingdom High Commissioner to Sierra Leone resident in Conakry between May 1997 and April 1998 by *(a)* EU embassies and *(b)* non-EU embassies; what messages were sent by the United Kingdom High Commissioner to Sierra Leone resident in Conakry between May 1997 and April 1998 to London via the German embassy in Conakry; and for what reason no confidential bag service was available to the UK High Commissioner to Sierra Leone resident in Conakry between May 1997 and April 1998. [66384]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The German Embassy in Conakry provided limited communication and logistical support to Mr. Penfold whilst he was in Conakry. Other EU embassies and non EU embassies did not provide special assistance. Mr. Penfold received a number of classified telegrams via the German Embassy but used commercial fax facilities for sending messages to London. Mr. Penfold was operating on a temporary basis and in hotel accommodation and arrangements were made for a commercial courier service limited to non-classified material.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will give permission to Horst Timmreck to visit St. Helena to reclaim his property. [65791]

Mr. Fatchett: Mr. Horst Timmreck is subject to a St. Helenian exclusion order, the revocation or variation of which is the responsibility of the Governor of St. Helena. Any application by Mr. Timmreck for a visit to St. Helena under a variation of the exclusion order should be made to the Governor.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for the introduction of access to the Internet at reasonable cost by citizens of St. Helena. [65789]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: St. Helena's telecommunications are provided by Cable and Wireless plc. Internet access is currently available, on a temporary basis, through Ascension Island. Cable and Wireless has recently removed its standing charge for such access. It plans to install an Internet server on St. Helena in 1999 and will review its charges when this becomes operational.

Vanuatu (Diplomatic Representation)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for diplomatic representation by Her Majesty's Government in Vanuatu. [65792]

Mr. Fatchett: Her Majesty's Government will continue to be represented. We are at present looking at the form this representation will take in the future.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Millennium Volunteer Scheme

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what the budget is for the Millennium Volunteer Scheme; how much has been spent to date, broken down into *(a)* volunteer schemes and *(b)* administration; [65238]

(2) how many volunteers have taken part in the Millennium Volunteer Scheme to date; if he will publish a breakdown of volunteers by *(a)* gender and *(b)* ethnic group; and if he will make a statement on the number of people helped by the scheme. [65239]

Ms Hodge: Millennium Volunteers will have a total of £15 million allocated to it from the windfall levy as start up funding in Great Britain, of which £12.75 million is available in England. £303,935 has been spent on the Programme to date in England, of which £109,870 relates to projects and related expenditure and £194,065 relates to administration. I hope to be making a further announcement about Millennium Volunteers and the longer term funding of the programme in England shortly.

A total of 269 volunteers have taken part in the nine Millennium Volunteers demonstration projects we established last summer. Of these, 168 were female and 101 male; 226 were white and 43 were from black or Asian ethnic groups. We will be evaluating the benefits to the community and to the individual volunteers of Millennium Volunteers but it is too early to provide such an assessment at present.

Engineering Students

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to monitor the impact of the new student funding system on recruitment to higher education institutions of students studying engineering. [65294]

Mr. Mudie: Initial evidence shows that there is a small decrease of 1.7 per cent. in the total number of people accepted to higher education. This is made up of an increase in school and college leavers and a decrease in mature students.

Although the Department has no mechanisms in place to monitor specific subject areas, it has in place a programme of evaluation work to assess the impact of the new funding arrangements on participation in higher education by different types of student, examining for instance the social background, ethnic group, disability, age and gender of students and subject of study, which will include engineering. This work will draw on data produced by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In addition, we are commissioning an update of the Student Income and Expenditure Survey which will provide information about the impact of the new arrangements on student finances.

The key results of our monitoring and research will be published and available to Parliament.

Rainham Marsh, Havering

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the basis for the statement in the application and associated papers that the Employment Service supports the amended planning application made by Havering Borough Council for development on a site of special scientific interest at Rainham Marsh in Havering. [65906]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Tom Brake, dated 14 January 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question in which you asked for information on what is the basis for the statement in the application and associated papers that the Employment Service supports the amended planning application made by Havering Borough Council for development on a site of special scientific interest at Rainham Marsh in Havering. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Employment Service has made no formal response to the planning application. However, I understand that Havering Borough Council asked the manager of our Dagenham Jobcentre in November for information on numbers of Jobseekers and skill levels/shortages within the Rainham area and for an assurance that, in the event of a Business Park being built on Rainham Marsh, the Employment Service would support the Council in recruiting construction and other workers for this project. Such an assurance of help was given on the understanding that it would apply only if the planning application was approved.

I hope this is helpful.

Nurses

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many non-EEA nurses have been given work permits for UK hospitals in each of the last five years; and how many of these are *(a)* for one year only and *(b)* for longer than one year. [66053]

Ms Hodge: The specific information requested is not available as work permit records do not identify the type of employer. The numbers of non-EEA nurses for whom work permits were issued in the last five years were as follows:

Year	*12 months or less*	*More than 12 months*
1994	88	413
1995	74	573
1996	148	759
1997	363	475
1998	583	636

Special Needs

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department gives on the maximum time which local education authorities should take to produce a statement of special educational needs; and what procedures are in place to measure compliance with this guidance. [65785]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Local education authorities are required by law to serve a draft statement on the parents of a child with special educational needs within eighteen weeks of first proposing to carry out an assessment of the child's needs. The Audit Commission monitors LEAs' compliance with this requirement, and publishes annual statistics for England and Wales showing the proportion of draft statements produced by each LEA within eighteen weeks. These statistics show that in 1996–97 only 48 per cent. of all draft statements were prepared within the statutory deadline. The Programme of Action on special educational needs published by the Department last November made it clear that the Government regard this figure as unacceptably low, and that they are committed to achieving a significant improvement. The Department has recently provided LEAs with advice on good practice in this area, and has challenged the worst-performing LEAs to improve.

Arts and Humanities Research Board

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to extend grants given by the Arts and Humanities Research Board to institutions other than those receiving grants from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Department of Education (Northern Ireland). [66234]

Mr. Mudie: The Arts and Humanities Research Board currently receives grants for its research activities, other than postgraduate awards, only from the HEFCE and DENI; and it therefore makes research grants to institutions within their areas of funding responsibility. The provision of additional funding for the AHRB to extend its research grants to institutions in Scotland and Wales is a matter primarily for the Scottish and Welsh Higher Education Funding Councils, taking into account guidance from my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales.

Teaching Union Officers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has issued to local education authorities on good practice in providing time off for officers of teaching unions. [65752]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No such guidance has been issued to local education authorities. The statutory entitlement to reasonable time off for employee representatives to perform their functions as such representatives is a general entitlement and it is for individual employers to decide their practice in meeting their legal obligations.

Teachers (Bureaucracy)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the members of his Department's working Group on Reducing the Bureaucratic Burden on Teachers, the date on which it was set up and the number of meetings it has held. [65946]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The membership of the Working Group on Reducing the Bureaucratic Burden on Teachers and the date on which it was set up are detailed in my reply to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) on 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *556–57*.

The Group met six times in preparing its report to Ministers, which was published on 16 January 1998. A copy of the report is in the Library.

School Consultation Exercises

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria are used to determine how many and which schools will be involved in those consultation exercises which are conducted with a random selection of schools. [65944]

Mr. Charles Clarke: For most purposes, a sample of 500 schools is sufficient. A sample will be larger only if it is important to analyse responses from different types of school. Schools are selected using systematic sampling from a list in area and phase of school order. The system ensures that any one school will be selected infrequently, thereby minimising the burden of consultation.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on how many occasions over the past year his Department has given recipients 10 weeks, excluding school holidays, to respond to consultation documents. [65940]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Between January and December of 1998 this Department gave a response time of 10 weeks or more for 27 consultation documents.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria are used to determine which consultation documents should be sent to a limited number of schools rather than all schools. [65943]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Only consultations on major changes affecting schools are sent to all schools. Normally, consultation papers are sent only to a small sample of about 500 schools.

Education Action Zones

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the sums of money that have been paid, to date, into each Education Action Zone by the businesses involved in those zones. [65945]

Ms Estelle Morris: The 25 Education Action Zones have so far raised some £5 million towards the £6 million target for business contribution in the first year.

Disability Rights Commission

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *97*, if he will list the estimated costs for each of the proposed functions of the Commission which formed the basis of the estimated annual running cost of the Commission. [66029]

Ms Hodge: It will be for the Disability Rights Commission (DRC), when it is established, to decide how to allocate its resources.

CABINET OFFICE

Ministerial Responsibilities

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will up-date last October's List of Ministerial Responsibilities. [65773]

Mr. Kilfoyle: A revised edition of the "List of Ministerial Responsibilities including Agencies" is currently being prepared and I shall publish it shortly. Copies of the new edition will be made available to Members free of charge from the Vote Office.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Abortion

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the medical grounds for abortion in Northern Ireland extend to *(a)* foetal abnormality and *(b)* rape, incest or sexual assault. [64776]

Mr. Ingram: While the law on abortion in Northern Ireland does not extend specifically to cover *(a)* foetal abnormality or *(b)* rape, incest or sexual assault, therapeutic terminations can be carried out in both these categories where in the doctors' judgment, there is serious risk to the physical or mental health of the mother.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of conceptions in the latest year for which figures are available ended in recorded spontaneous abortion. [64777]

Mr. McFall: Information on the total number of conceptions is not collected centrally. There are currently no plans to do so in the future.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many of the abortions recorded in Northern Ireland in 1997–98 were classified as *(a)* spontaneous abortions and *(b)* induced or medical abortions. [64778]

Mr. McFall: Of the abortions which took place in Northern Ireland hospitals in 1997–98, 1,594 were recorded as spontaneous and 77 as medical or induced abortions.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will issue guidelines to general practitioners, obstetricians and gynaecologists *(a)* on the grounds under which termination of pregnancy may be carried out and *(b)* on referring women who qualify for a legal abortion under the terms of the Abortion Act 1967 to hospitals or clinics in those parts of the UK where the Act applies. [64779]

Mr. McFall: There are no plans to issue such guidelines in Northern Ireland.

SCOTLAND

Heroin

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the powers provided by the misuse of drugs legislation to law enforcement agencies in respect of heroin abuse. [64314]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* The Government fully recognise the dangers posed by the misuse of heroin and the need for effective measures to tackle the problem. The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 provides law enforcement agencies with a range of powers enabling them to take action against those suspected of producing, supplying, or being in possession of controlled drugs. The adequacy of these powers is kept continuously under review and the Government will not hesitate to act if they consider that the powers require to be strengthened.

Royal Burgh Improvements

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much has been spent in Scotland on Royal Burgh environment improvement by the Government since May 1997. [64427]

Mr. McLeish: This information is not held centrally.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the total cumulative cost to his Department of ministerial use of RAF flights in the year to 1 May 1997. [64738]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* As the answer enclosed with my letter of 2 December made clear, Ministers are required under the terms of the Ministerial Code always to make efficient and cost effective travel arrangements. The rules on travel for Ministers are the same as those which applied to the previous Administration. A comparison of travel by Ministers on RAF flights between the 16 month period between 2 May 1997 and 30 September 1998 is not directly comparable with the 12 months of the previous Administration. The cost of air travel by RAF flights in the year to May 1997 is £8,972.50.

Mr. Stephen Kock

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on what date in 1990 Mr. Stephen Kock was interviewed for a firearms offence in Scotland; and in what circumstances. [65123]

Mr. McLeish: On 15 January 1990, a complaint was received by Strathclyde Police regarding the reckless discharge of a firearm by Mr. Kock who was formally cautioned. On Friday, 9 February 1990, Mr. Kock was charged with the culpable and reckless discharge of a firearm; contravention of the Firearms Act 1968; assault; and breach of the peace. Mr. Kock subsequently pled guilty at Oban Sheriff Court to the firearms charges and was fined a total of £650. Not guilty pleas to the remaining charges were accepted by the Procurator Fiscal.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what police protection has been provided for the home of Mr. Stephen Kock at public expense; and when such protection was provided. [65122]

Mr. McLeish: No police protection has ever been provided at the home of Mr. Stephen Kock.

Central Scotland Healthcare NHS Trust

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish the report of the inquiry into alleged misappropriation of public funds by senior management of Central Scotland Healthcare NHS Trust. [65983]

Mr. Galbraith: The decision to publish the Report of the Independent Inquiry team into remuneration matters at Central Scotland Healthcare NHS Trust is the responsibility of the Trust itself, together with action arising from the Report's recommendations.

The former Chairman of the Trust has given a commitment that the findings of the Report will be made public and I expect this commitment to be honoured by the Trust board when it considers the final Report later this month.

Public Defence Solicitors' Office

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on how many occasions the Director of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office has met the Chief Executive of the Scottish Legal Aid Board since his appointment; if those meetings were minuted; and if he will place a copy of any minutes or notes from the meetings in the Library. [65794]

Mr. McLeish: Mr. Alistair Watson of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office took up post on 1 April 1998. He reports to the Scottish Legal Aid Board through the Chief Executive only on administrative matters. On all other matters, including casework, the PDSO operates independently of the Board.

Since 1 April 1998, the Director and the Chief Executive have had a number of meetings on administrative matters. The exact number has not been recorded. Notes of these meetings are internal documents of the Board and are confidential.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many clients have been referred to the Public Defence Solicitor's Office since its establishment, broken down by month; and how many (i) interviews with clients have been conducted, (ii) intermediate diets have been carried out on behalf of clients and (iii) trials have been conducted on behalf of clients. [65955]

Mr. McLeish: The number of clients/new cases referred to the Public Defence Solicitors' Office (PDSO) since its establishment on 1 October 1998 until 31 December 1998 (the latest date for which information is available) is shown in the following table.

Month/Year	*New cases*
October 1998	42
November 1998	55
December 1998	65

Information on the total number of interviews with clients is not available as many of these interviews may have taken place at court.

Intermediate diets were scheduled to take place by 31 December 1998 on 19 occasions. No information is presently available on how many of these diets proceeded. Twelve trial diets were scheduled to take place by 31 December 1998. Of those, 3 proceeded to trial.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will give details of *(a)* the salary of the Public Defence Solicitor, *(b)* the salaries of each of his deputies, *(c)* the administrative staff costs of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office, *(d)* the rental costs of the office and *(e)* the other outgoings of the office. [65793]

Mr. McLeish: The salary of the Director of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office (PDSO) is £50,000 per annum; and the salaries of the 5 public defence solicitors range from £21,000 to £30,000 per annum. The total support staff salary bill is £74,555 per annum (inclusive of National Insurance). The annual rental costs of the office are £52,875 and the other outgoings are estimated to be £117,150 per annum.

Beavers

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to the letter of 6 October from the Minister with responsibility for agriculture, the environment and fisheries to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what expert advice and recommendations he has received from Scottish Natural Heritage concerning the re-introduction of beavers into Scotland; and what action he proposes to take. [65392]

Mr. Macdonald: No formal advice or recommendations has yet been submitted by Scottish Natural Heritage to my hon. Friend. I understand that SNH's view is that a limited pilot reintroduction project may be the best way forward. SNH is developing proposals prior to putting advice and recommendations to Ministers.

Nurses

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the NHS salary bill for nurses in Scotland in each of the last 10 years, *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a percentage of the total NHS salary bill. [65521]

Mr. Galbraith: The information requested is set out in the table.

Year	*Total nurses salary £000*	*Total NHS salary £000*	*Nurse salary as a percentage of total NHS salary*
1988–89	738,259	1,425,909	52
1989–90	786,392	1,510,465	52
1990–91	842,468	1,625,882	52
1991–92	919,553	1,776,949	52
1992–93	973,935	1,934,970	50
1993–94	983,824	1,999,373	49
1994–95	975,110	2,040,930	48
1995–96	967,186	2,074,408	47
1996–97	973,577	2,142,188	45
1997–98	979,283	2,177,879	45

Source:
Annual Accounts of Health Boards, NHS Trusts, Common Services Agency and the State Hospital.

The decrease in the salary bill for nurses in 1994–95 onwards is due to the introduction of Project 2000. The figures for 1997–98 are provisional.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many whole-time equivalent *(a)* bank, *(b)* agency and *(c)* contract nurses were employed, and at what cost, in each of the NHS health trust areas in Scotland for each of the last 10 years. [65520]

Mr. Galbraith: The information for agency nursing staff, which is available only from 1994 onwards, is shown in the table. No cost data to match the staff numbers are available. Information for bank and contract nursing staff is not available centrally.

Agency nursing staff: average whole time equivalent[1] by provider; year ending 30 September

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*[2]
South Ayrshire Hospitals NHS Trust	0.1	0.0	0.0	2.2	3.6
North Ayrshire and Arran NHS Trust	—	—	—	0.7	2.5
Ayrshire and Arran Community Health Care NHS Trust	0.3	0.3	0.0	—	—
Borders General Hospital NHS Trust	—	—	2.8	—	0.2
Borders Community Health Services NHS Trust	0.4	0.0	0.2	—	—
Argyll and Clyde Health Board HQ	1.0	—	—	—	—
Royal Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust	7.8	8.1	3.7	7.4	19.6
Inverclyde Royal NHS Trust	0.9	—	—	—	0.5
Renfrewshire Healthcare NHS Trust	1.9	30.8	31.3	44.9	43.5
Lomond Healthcare NHS Trust	0.1	0.2	4.8	4.8	4.8
Queen Margaret Hospital NHS Trust	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.5	1.9
Fife Healthcare NHS Trust	3.6	0.1	1.7	5.7	0.0

Agency nursing staff: average whole time equivalent[1] by provider; year ending 30 September

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998[2]
Kirkcaldy Acute Hospitals NHS Trust	—	—	—	0.3	0.3
Southern General Hospital NHS Trust	7.9	15.0	11.7	21.8	18.7
Yorkhill NHS Trust	4.4	4.2	3.3	3.1	3.1
Victoria Infirmary NHS Trust	9.3	5.9	7.1	10.7	23.4
West Glasgow Hospitals University NHS Trust	47.2	53.7	23.7	46.5	51.6
Glasgow Royal Infirmary University NHS Trust	6.7	13.1	20.6	27.8	35.4
Stobhill NHS Trust	1.2	1.0	1.2	0.5	1.5
Glasgow Community and Mental Health Services NHS Trust	0.2	—	—	—	—
Glasgow Dental Hospital and School NHS Trust	—	—	—	0.6	—
Raigmore Hospital NHS Trust	—	—	—	—	0.0
Caithness and Sutherland NHS Trust	0.1	0.0	1.2	2.6	—
Highland Communities NHS Trust	0.1	2.4	2.9	9.7	13.2
Monklands and Bellshill Hospitals NHS Trust	—	0.2	0.3	0.3	9.9
Law Hospital NHS Trust	—	—	0.0	—	—
Hairmyres and Stonehouse Hospitals NHS Trust	—	—	—	—	0.1
Aberdeen Royal Hospitals NHS Trust	2.9	1.6	1.8	7.9	24.2
Grampian Healthcare NHS Trust	23.6	44.6	26.3	13.8	13.8
Moray Health Services NHS Trust	—	—	1.3	0.1	0.3
Orkney Health Board	—	—	—	0.2	0.2
West Lothian NHS Trust	—	—	0.1	0.0	0.6
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh NHS Trust	53.6	110.6	167.9	139.4	142.3
Edinburgh Sick Children's NHS Trust	1.5	10.1	22.0	22.3	21.5
Western General Hospitals NHS Trust	11.2	17.8	30.5	4.9	26.5
East and Midlothian NHS Trust	7.3	6.5	22.6	17.5	11.4
Edinburgh Healthcare NHS Trust	2.2	9.0	6.0	3.6	1.5
Perth and Kinross Healthcare NHS Trust	—	—	—	—	0.3
Dundee Healthcare NHS Trust	—	—	1.0	1.8	2.0
Stirling Royal Infirmary NHS Trust	—	—	0.8	1.6	2.6
Falkirk and District Royal Infirmary NHS Trust	0.0	14.9	15.3	1.3	1.5
Central Scotland Healthcare NHS Trust	—	2.4	47.1	51.2	18.3
Western Isles Health Board	—	—	—	—	0.0
Shetland Health Board	—	0.0	—	—	—

[1] To calculate the average 1 W. T. E. is taken as a contribution of 37.5 hours per week x 52 = 1,950 hours per year.

[2] Data for 1997 and 1998 are based on one six month period ending 30 September. Data for 1994 to 1996 are based on two six month periods ending 31 March and 30 September.

Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the forthcoming policy and financial management review of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. [66484]

Mr. Dewar: As part of the Government's programme of periodic reviews of non-Departmental Public Bodies, I announced to the House on 19 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *336*, our proposal to move forward with a review of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

The first stage of the review has been completed. This addressed major issues of principle. The report has established that *(a)* there is an overwhelming need and demand for continuation of the Royal Commission's core functions, principally surveying and recording the man-made environment of Scotland and maintaining and curating the National Monuments Record of Scotland; *(b)* privatisation or contracting out of the entirety of the Royal Commission's activities is not feasible, although opportunities will continue to be taken to contract out discrete areas of work where this is cost-effective; *(c)* there are arguments for and against rationalisation or merger with other organisations dealing with built heritage or public record functions; in the absence however, or significant cost savings or a demonstrable increase in efficiency, the balance of advantage lies with the status quo; and *(d)* there is a continuing role for the Royal Commission and local authorities to play at the national and local levels respectively. I have arranged for a copy of the report to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

With these issues of principle now resolved, the second stage of the review will examine a number of organisational, management and finance issues. This will encompass the public services dimension to the Royal Commission's activities and liaison with local government.

I am writing to the Royal Commission's Chairman informing him that we concur with the report's conclusions.

Skye Bridge

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the draft Skye Bridge Toll Order or the actual Order were made available for inspection in accordance with the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984; and if he will make a statement. [66339]

Mr. Macdonald: In accordance with Schedules 1 and 2 to the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984, the draft Order was made available for public inspection from 1 November to 13 December 1991 and the actual Order from 26 June to 7 August 1992.

Agricultural Business Improvement Scheme

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to publish the revised Agricultural Business Improvement Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [66452]

Mr. Macdonald: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) on 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *235*.

Salmon Anaemia

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what response the Minister with responsibility for agriculture, the environment and fisheries has given to the request of independent smolt producers for a meeting to discuss the impact upon the Scottish salmon industry of infectious salmon anaemia. [66453]

Mr. Macdonald: The request is being considered. My noble Friend is very conscious of the concerns that have arisen as a result of infectious salmon anaemia. He has already held several meetings on the matter with representatives of the fish farming industry, including smolt producers.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps have been taken to avoid conflicts of interest among those who provide advice to the public on behalf of Action 2000. [64712]

Mr. Wills: I understand that, to avoid potential conflicts of interest, in its advice and guidance material Action 2000 redirects wherever possible relevant inquiries to other sources of advice and suppliers of millennium products in the UK of which it is aware.

In addition, Action 2000 has a general policy not to allow its contractors or third party commercial organisations to use the Action 2000 name or logo to imply support or endorsement of any commercially available millennium product or service.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if it is a condition of the contract between Action 2000 and Data Dimensions Inc. that Data Dimensions Inc. shall not promote its own millennium compliance methodology product and associated courses; and if he will make a statement. [64711]

Mr. Wills: Action 2000 is an independent company set up by DTI to help UK businesses tackle the Millennium Bug.

I understand that in the contract with Data Dimensions Action 2000 has not included a condition preventing Data Dimensions from promoting their own millennium compliance methodology products and associated courses.

Action 2000 has a general policy of not allowing third party commercial organisations to use the Action 2000 name or logo to imply support or endorsement of their commercially available millennium products or services. It has not given Data Dimensions permission to use its contract with Action 2000 to imply support or endorsement by Action 2000 of its millennium compliance methodology products and associated courses.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what tendering process preceded the award by Action 2000 of a contract to Data Dimensions Inc. for the development of a database of providers of software products for millennium compliance; and on what date the contract was completed. [64710]

Mr. Wills: I understand that Action 2000 invited three companies to tender against a clearly defined Service Specification and according to normal DTI tendering rules. All respondents were visited prior to issue of the Invitation to Tender and invited to present their proposals to Action 2000 and an independent representative from Business Links.

All responses were analysed against objective service and commercial criteria. Data Dimensions was awarded the contract on the basis of:

Meeting the Action 2000 service requirement.

Realistic pricing with scope for flexibility.

Low commercial risk to Action 2000.

Credible supplier (particularly at being able to handle potentially large volumes of technical inquiries).

The contract was formally awarded on 14 September 1998. The new Year 2000 Software Status Service was delivered on time in October to specification and within budget.

Assisted Areas

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make representations to the EU Commission concerning the reduction in population covered by assisted areas in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [65163]

Mr. Wills: The reduction in population coverage reflects the Commission Guidelines on national regional aid which were issued on 10 March 1997. The Guidelines are mandatory.

Competitiveness

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's work to develop the UK as a high-productivity, high-skill knowledge economy. [65284]

Mr. Byers: The White Paper on competitiveness, "Our competitive future: building the knowledge driven economy", sets out an ambitious and wide-ranging programme for my Department to promote business competitiveness.

Amongst the proposals there will be new help for businesses to build their capabilities by promoting enterprise; exploiting science and technology; developing skills; and using information and communications technology. There will be substantial assistance to encourage business to collaborate, including funding for ten other sectors to follow the successful SMMT Industry Forum model and substantial backing for the CBI's Fit for the Future campaign to encourage a massive increase across the economy in take-up of best practice.

To provide the right environment in which business can compete, Government will promote open and competitive markets and crack down on harmful anti-competitive behaviour. My department will develop a new strategy to make the UK the leading country for electronic commerce, with legislation to remove legal barriers and support for an industry-led push to boost consumer confidence.

Consumer Credit Licences

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the circumstances in which an individual or business is required to obtain a consumer credit licence. [65588]

Dr. Howells: In general any business which provides credit under agreements which are regulated by the Consumer Credit Act 1974 is required to hold a consumer credit licence issued by the Director General of Fair Trading. The Act regulates agreements involving the granting of credit up to £25,000 to individuals, including sole traders and partnerships. Section 16 of the Act exempts some types of consumer credit agreement and businesses which only offer exempt agreements do not require a licence. Licences are also required by businesses and others who hire or lease out goods, arrange credit for others, collect debts, undertake debt adjusting and debt counselling, and by credit reference agencies.

Prepayment Gas Meters

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the percentage of pensioners who pay their domestic gas costs with prepayment meters. [65971]

Mr. Battle: A survey conducted during the summer of 1998, which was commissioned by Ofgas, estimated that approximately 2 per cent. of those aged over 65 use prepayment gas meters.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will establish a Government task force to promote renewable energy. [65777]

Mr. Battle: An advisory body already exists. The Renewable Energy Advisory Committee advises the Department of Trade and Industry on the aims, content, environmental appropriateness and economic applicability of the Department's new and renewable energy market enablement programme and policy on new and renewable energy. The committee's membership is drawn from industry, academia, local government, environmental bodies and Government. The DTI values the committee's work and has implemented its advice on the development of new and renewable energy.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's progress in achieving 10 per cent. of the country's energy from renewable sources. [66076]

Mr. Battle: The Government are committed to a new and strong drive to develop renewable energy sources.

As a first step in our new and strong drive for renewables, I announced the fifth and largest Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO-5) Order of 1177 MW on 24 September 1998. A third Scottish Renewables Obligation Order (SRO-3) will be made on 7 February 1999, probably for between 110–120 MW.

Today about 2 per cent. of our electricity comes from renewables, mostly from large scale hydro. NFFO Orders already laid or in train will add a further 3 per cent. by around 2002 or 2003. The challenge is to move from about 5 per cent. in 2003 to 10 per cent. by 2010. I have therefore instigated a review to consider what would be necessary and practicable to achieve this. I expect to publish a consultation document on the review shortly.

I have already reversed the planned cuts in the renewables programme budget which the previous Government had made, so that the renewables programme budget for this year (1998–99) has been maintained at £11.1 million. The Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC) also supports work on new and renewable energy, spending about £1 million a year on its Photovoltaics programme alone and expects to launch a new programme on "Renewables and New Energy Technologies" later this year (£3.5 million a year).

Grid Access

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans his Department has to simplify procedures for grid access for small renewable generating companies. [65778]

Mr. Battle: My Department's new and renewable energy programme has supported a number of studies, involving both renewable generating companies and the electricity supply industry, with the aim of encouraging the development of commercial and regulatory frameworks for electricity supply that allow renewable generators to compete with more established generation methods on a fair and unbiased footing.

To give only one example of the work being undertaken, we are supporting a project entitled Technical Criteria for Electrical Integration of Photovoltaic (PV) Systems into Electricity Supply Networks (ETSU contract number S/P2/00215/00/00) which includes the holding of regular meetings with a consultative group of Regional Electricity Companies (RECs) and will involve the production of a guide to be entitled, "UK Technical Guidelines for Inverter Connected Single Phase PV Generators up to 5kVA".

Electricity Pool

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if it is his intention to introduce reform of the electricity pool system by the first half of the year 2000. [65633]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* It is my intention to proceed with these reforms as soon as it is possible to do so. The Programme Director responsible for the process of implementing new trading arrangements is currently examining the steps required to meet the suggested target implementation date of 1 April 2000 contained in OFFER's Proposals document published in July 1998. He will provide further advice on the timing of implementation in due course.

Branded Products (Discounts)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what papers relating to British retailers wishing to sell branded products at discount prices were brought to the previous Secretary of State's attention. [65642]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the previous Secretary of State and his ministerial colleagues saw numerous papers in the normal course of business, a number of which touched on pricing issues.

BSkyB (Manchester United)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if any papers relating to BSkyB's proposed takeover of Manchester United were brought to his predecessor's attention. [65641]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* In the course of deciding whether to refer BSkyB's proposed acquisition of Manchester United to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, my right hon. Friend naturally considered relevant papers, in particular the advice submitted to him by the Director General of Fair Trading.

Mergers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the current number of proposed mergers. [65629]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* There are some twenty proposed mergers presently under consideration by the DGFT.

Digital Broadcasting

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the competition policy implications of the establishment of a publicly funded digital broadcast service to support the GCSE curriculum. [65692]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Department for Education and Employment has invited companies with a broadcasting or transmission licence and experience in the provision of educational broadcast material to submit tenders on a competitive basis for the provision of specific digital broadcast services to support the GCSE curriculum. I understand that a copy of the invitation to tender is being deposited in the Library of the House.

I am not aware that there are any competition policy implications arising from this exercise. In the first instance any concerns of this nature should be brought to the attention of the Department for Education and Employment.

Defence Mergers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on his policy towards large-scale mergers in the United Kingdom defence industry; [65617]

(2) what plans he has to encourage competition in the United Kingdom defence industry. [65625]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear since his statement with the French and German Heads of Government in December 1997, there is an urgent need to restructure the aerospace and defence industries in Europe to compete in world markets.

It is for industry itself, not Government, to make specific proposals for restructuring. Any resulting merger would be considered on its own merits by the relevant competition authorities.

Power Generation

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what appraisal he has made of the implications of the expansion of power generation through combined cycle gas turbines not fitted with an automatic governor response for the security of the national grid network. [65985]

Mr. Battle: The Government have not made any appraisal of the issue mentioned, since all combined cycle gas turbines connected to the National Grid Company's transmission system are required under the Grid Code to have automatic governors fitted. The Government have, however, established a steering group to take forward work on a number of other system security and stability measures (black start, frequency response, load following, and reactive power), as proposed in the October 1998 White Paper Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government Response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee. This group will also consider the impact on the Grid of plant which is not connected to it and which is not, therefore, bound by the Grid Code.

Consumer Representation

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce the Government's response to the recent consultation exercise on consumer representation in the gas and electricity industries. [65984]

Mr. Battle: The recent consultation exercise covered the arrangements for consumer representation in the telecommunications and water sectors, as well as the gas and electricity industries. I expect to be able to announce the Government's response to the consultation shortly.

Nuclear Fuel

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements are being made to return to Japan nuclear materials recovered from reprocessing Japanese spent nuclear fuel at BNFL's Sellafield plant. [66647]

Mr. Battle: The Government have been consulting the Government of Japan for some time about arrangements for returning the nuclear materials, including plutonium, recovered from reprocessing Japanese spent nuclear fuel at Sellafield. This is in keeping with the terms of the letters exchanged between the two Governments in 1978 in support of reprocessing contracts between Japanese utilities and BNFL and the policy of successive Governments.

The Government of Japan's preferred means of using the recovered plutonium is for it to be converted into Mixed Oxide (MOX) fuel for use in Japanese nuclear power stations. The MOX fuel, including material produced by BNFL's counterpart COGEMA in France, will be returned by sea and carried by UK-flagged transport ships belonging to Pacific Nuclear Transport Ltd. (PNTL), a subsidiary of BNFL.

The purpose of the consultations between the UK and Japan has been to ensure that appropriate measures are put in place for the physical protection of the material in line with internationally agreed commitments and recommendations on physical protection and reflecting the concern of all parties to prevent the proliferation of sensitive nuclear materials. This includes compliance with the recommendation of the International Atomic Energy Agency that MOX fuel, like all other Category 1 nuclear material, should be accompanied during transport by an armed security escort.

All plutonium recovered from Japanese spent fuel reprocessed in Europe originates from uranium which was enriched in the US. Because of this, it falls within US rules of origin under which the US retains certain rights and responsibilities over its retransfer. This means that plans for the transport of MOX fuel from Europe to Japan by sea must comply with specific US requirements concerning safety and physical protection. These are set out in the 1988 US-Japan agreement on nuclear co-operation and include the requirement either that the transport ship should be accompanied by an armed escort vessel or that alternative security measures acceptable to the US should be in place.

The security arrangements currently under discussion with Japan and the US would involved 2 PNTL transport ships travelling together for mutual protection. Each would carry armaments, for defensive use only, under the control of specially trained officers of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority Constabulary. These security provisions are solely for protecting the ships, their crew and their cargo in the extremely unlikely eventuality of an armed assault by terrorists.

Regional Assistance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial assistance and grants are available from his Department to engineering companies in South Lancashire. [66028]

Mr. Wills: Within the Assisted Area in Lancashire, RSA is available to almost all businesses investing in manufacturing, as also to businesses in the service industry which serve a wider rather than a local market.

Business Links and TECs also have a wide range of business support services available to companies throughout Lancashire.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assistance his Department offers to indigenous British industries that wish to expand their operations. [66027]

Mr. Wills: The main form of assistance provided by the Department is Regional Selective Assistance. The scheme offers grants on a selective basis to firms planning new investment which creates or safeguards jobs in the Assisted Areas. In the last financial year (1997–98) around £65 million of grant was offered to UK owned firms in England.

Regional Development Agencies

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on the level of funding from the regional development agencies for rural areas. [65110]

Mr. Meale: I have been asked to reply.

The Department has received a number of representations on this issue. However, in the White Paper on the Regions, "Building Partnerships for Prosperity", the Government made it clear that their strong commitment to rural regeneration would continue to be reflected in the RDAs' funding for rural areas. There will be separate allocations for rural funding, and an integrated rural regeneration element of the Single Regeneration Budget.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the extent to which those who move from welfare to work as a result of the working families tax credit will *(a)* move into newly created jobs and *(b)* displace existing employees; and in the case of displacement, what assessment he has made of the characteristics of those who are likely to be displaced. [63660]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Working Families Tax Credit and the associated Childcare Tax Credit are designed to (a) make work more attractive for those currently out of employment and (b) enable one and two parent families to increase the hours they work by assisting with costs of childcare. These are part of a range of new measures which should together assist people in moving from welfare to work. The Government are undertaking considerable preparatory work ahead of the introduction of WFTC in October, but no reliable assessment of either the number of people moving into newly created jobs or displacement of existing employees can be made.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of how many people will be eligible for the working families tax credit when it is fully operational. [63189]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* It is estimated that in 2000–01, the first full year of the Working Families Tax Credit, about 1.3 million families will be in receipt of the credit.

Taxation (Savings)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is intended that the proposals for a directive on the taxation of savings as announced in the European Council Conclusions (Vienna 11 and 12 December) should involve an investigation of the differing income tax regimes of member states in respect of the taxation of savings and the differing rates of income tax thereon. [64641]

Dawn Primarolo: No. The draft directive on the taxation of savings which is currently under consideration in Brussels would not affect the way income from savings is treated in national income tax systems.

Business Taxes

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of additional sums which would be raised in the United Kingdom if the German proposal for alignment of business taxes were implemented on the basis of current German levels. [64806]

Dawn Primarolo: No such estimate has been made. There is no German proposal for alignment of business taxes.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 27 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *23*, for what reasons he was unable to provide the specific information requested. [64722]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave him on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *849*.

Teenage Suicides (Surrey)

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many teenage suicides have occurred in South-West Surrey since 1995. [65575]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mrs. Virginia Bottomley, dated 18 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentry question asking how many teenage suicides have occurred in South West Surrey since 1995.

The data requested are shown in the table below.

Number of deaths certified as due to suicide and undetermined injury occurring to teenage residents of South West Surrey, 1995–97

Year of occurrence	*Number of suicides*	*Number of undetermined deaths*
1995	0	0
1996	0	0
1997	0	1

Notes:

1. Teenagers were identified as between 13 and 19 years of age.
2. South West Surrey was taken as the constituency of the same name.
3. The table includes deaths given an open verdict and coded to "death from injury and poisoning undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted", in addition to those given a suicide verdict, as it is likely that most undetermined deaths among 'adults' (15 and over) are cases where the harm was self-inflicted but there was insufficient evidence to prove that the deceased deliberately intended to kill themselves.

Mutual Building Societies

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the impact of a reduction in the mutual building society sector on the housing market. [65572]

Ms Hewitt: I have not commissioned any research into this issue, although my officials, along with those at the Bank of England and the Building Societies Commission, do keep the market under review.

Mortgages

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates he has made of the relative costs of mortgages from *(a)* commercial banks and *(b)* building societies. [65569]

Ms Hewitt: Estimates of the basic rates charged for a mortgage by banks or building societies are available in Table 7.1L of the 'Financial Statistics' monthly report produced by The Office for National Statistics, a copy of which is available in the House Library.

The industry's trade body, the Council of Mortgage Lenders, also publish figures once a quarter.

Inflation

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the appropriate measure of inflation for defining the inflation target; and if he plans to introduce an inflation target defined in terms of the harmonised index of consumer prices. [65678]

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to adopt the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices as a target measure for inflation. [66054]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set an inflation target for the Bank of England cast in terms of the harmonised index of consumer prices, as recommended to him by the IMF in their annual Article IV assessment of British economic policy. [66425]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Bank of England Act 1998 requires the Treasury to specify what price stability is to be taken to consist of at least once in every period of 12 months. In his last Budget on 17 March 1998, *Official Report*, column 1098, the Chancellor confirmed the Government's inflation target is 2½ per cent. defined by the 12-month increase in the RPI excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX).

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions (Computer Changeover)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, in relation to North Staffordshire Benefits Agency, how many persons pension contributions have not been processed due to delays arising from the changeover of the computer dealing with retirement pension rights; what the reason is for the further projected delay in the changeover of the computer; what is the new projected date for the new computer to be in full working order; and what arrangements he has put in place to cover the period during which the computer is inoperative; how these arrangements have worked; and if he will make a statement. [65371]

Mr. Timms: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security in his Written Answer on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *603–06*, advised the House that the Contributions Agency had introduced a new National Insurance Recording Computer System. During the first year of operation the system is being introduced through a series of pilots leading to national implementation.

Progress has been made against plans to move pilots into national operation. The NIRS2 link to the Jobseeker's Allowance computer system was implemented nationally on 9 November 1998 and new claims are now being dealt with through the normal interface between the two systems. The NIRS2 reports used for Incapacity Benefit were implemented nationally on 18 November 1998. Reports are being carefully screened before being released to Benefit Agency local offices.

Retirement Pensions and Widows Benefit calculation facilities became nationally available on 6 January 1999. The Benefits Agency is continuing to make initial awards of Retirement Pension and emergency payments to widows and those claiming Retirement Pension where no record of the contribution history is available.

The Benefits Agency has continued to identify and distribute claim packs automatically to those individuals approaching pension age using information from the previous National Insurance Recording system (NIRS). All initial awards of Retirement Pension have been calculated using the information from the old NIRS system. This contingency arrangement has worked well since the conversion to the new NIRS2 system began on the 19 June 1998. 97 per cent. of all claims to Retirement Pension have been processed using information from NIRS. Initial awards made since April 1998 will be reviewed when the 1997/98 National Insurance Contribution information has been posted to account. The Benefits Agency hopes to begin reviewing these claims from April 1999.

The Benefits Agency has increased the capacity to calculate clerically entitlement to State Earnings Related Pension Scheme for people who request it. 3,500 such calculations have been completed.

On 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 603–06, I reported that over 14 million National Insurance contributions for 1997/98 had been recorded on individual accounts. On 11 January the number of contribution items posted had risen to 31 million. We normally expect to record about 47 million contributions each year by the end of December. We hope to have recorded the balance by March 1999.

On 4 January 1999 the cumulative total of age-related rebate payments, paid to Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes in respect of individual scheme members in this financial year, increased from £630 million to £1,411 million, nearly 60 per cent. of the expected total for the year. This includes the December payment of £385.57 million and the January payment of £392 million. The figure includes a compensation element to compensate individual scheme members for any loss of investment income because of delayed payments.

By 31 December 1998, the cumulative total of contributions collected from the self-employed through Direct Debit and Quarterly Billing facilities in this financial year had increased to £342.5 million. In December £34.25 million was collected from 1.34 million self-employed contributors who pay contributions by Direct Debit and in January a further £42.3 million has been requested.

Scottish Juvenile registrations, for issuing National Insurance numbers, were processed and the plastic National Insurance Number (NINO) cards are currently being issued. Adult registrations are currently being processed using the NIRS2 on-line facility and plastic NINO cards are being issued.

New registration facilities for self-employed people, who want to pay their contributions by monthly Direct Debit, are being piloted. New registration facilities for self-employed people who pay contributions quarterly became available to specialist staff in Contributions Agency from 14 December 1998.

From the first Monday of the new benefit year, 4 January 1999, new claims to Incapacity Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance are being based on contributions paid during the 1996/97 and 1997/98 tax years. It is estimated that 65 per cent. of the relevant 1997/98 contributions have been posted to NIRS2. Whilst the remaining 1997/98 contributions are still being recorded in NIRS2, information to pay some new claims will need to be obtained from other sources.

The expected number of claims in January 1999 where contribution information will need to be obtained from other sources for Jobseeker's Allowance will be approximately 75,000 and for Incapacity Benefit approximately 21,000. These figures will be lower in February and March because additional National Insurance contribution information will be available on NIRS2, and by April 1999 all the National Insurance contributions needed should be available on the system. Claims will be automatically reviewed when 1997/98 National Insurance Contributions are posted.

There are long-standing contingency instructions in place to deal with these cases, and the Benefits Agency will advise customers if any additional information is required to deal with their claims. Both Jobseeker's Allowance and Incapacity Benefit contingency arrangements are in place from 4 January 1999.

Considerable effort has been jointly made by DSS Agencies, pensions industry and Andersen Consulting to maintain service levels. Staff from the Contributions Agency, Benefits Agency and Andersen Consulting were working together throughout the Christmas period to resolve the outstanding problems.

All the work involved is being taken forward through a co-ordinated plan agreed between the DSS Agencies involved and Andersen Consulting. Within the plan, priority is being given to those aspects of the NIRS2 system, which most directly affect benefit claims. I continue to expect that it will take until the end of this financial year to resume normal operations in full, and it will take longer to catch up on all backlogs. I shall keep the House informed of progress.

Independent Tribunal Service

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what steps are taken to ensure access for

disabled people to buildings used to hold Disability Living Allowance Independent Tribunal Service hearings; [65261]

(2) what training employees of the Independent Tribunal Service receive to ensure that they are aware of the special needs of people with a disability. [65271]

Angela Eagle: The Council on Tribunals (CoT) produce a code of practice entitled "Access for Disabled People Using Tribunals" to which the Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) fully adheres in relation to its own tribunal premises. Appeals involving Disability Living Allowance are heard by Disability Appeal Tribunals (DATs), and these tribunals sit only in premises containing appropriate facilities for disabled people. Such facilities include car-parking spaces, access ramps, internal lifts and furnishings and fittings suitable for disabled people whilst both sitting in and moving around the premises.

ITS operates an equal opportunities policy of which an essential element is an awareness of the needs of people with disabilities. This policy is explained to all new members of the administrative staff early in their induction training and reinforced at regular intervals thereafter, whilst tribunal clerks, who deal face-to-face with disabled appellants, are given more detailed supplementary training. An Equal Opportunities Officer is based in Nottingham, whose role is to monitor changes in policy and practice and to provide regular updates to all staff.

Judicial Officers of ITS—that is, tribunal chairmen and members—whilst not direct employees, also receive training in various aspects of human awareness and interpersonal skills, including the needs of people with disabilities. This, too, is delivered initially as part of the induction training for new appointees and subsequently incorporated into regular "refresher" training programmes at both local and national level.

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects take-up of stakeholder pensions to reach *(a)* 500,000, *(b)* 1 million, *(c)* 1.5 million and *(d)* 2 million; and what estimate he has made of the eventual level of take-up of stakeholder pensions. [65420]

Mr. Timms: The take-up of Stakeholder Pensions will depend on a number of factors and cannot be reliably predicted. There are estimated to be in the region of 5 million potential beneficiaries earning between £9,000 and £20,000 per annum: over 2 million people currently in SERPS, 2 million who currently have Appropriate Personal Pensions, and 1 million self employed people (some with personal pensions).

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what basis the figure of £9,000 per year was chosen as the value below which individuals would not be encouraged to take out stakeholder pensions. [65576]

Mr. Timms: The figure of £9,000 was judged to be broadly the annual earnings level where, at current levels of compulsion, pension contributions would be sufficient to make funded pensions cost-effective. This was based on a range of information, including minimum contribution levels used for the sale of personal pensions.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will update his estimates based on the Family Resources Survey 1996–97 of *(a)* median pensioner incomes, excluding means-tested benefits, by age, sex and marital status, consistent with his answer of 12 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *295–98*, and *(b)* the size of each group. [65581]

Mr. Timms: The information is set out in the tables.

Pensioner units' median gross income excluding means-tested benefits, by age

£ per week

1996–97	*Age*				
	60–64	*65–69*	*70–74*	*75–79*	*80 and over*
Single male pensioners	n/a	122	121	104	95
Single female pensioners	116	99	94	85	85
Pensioner couples	n/a	239	206	181	167

Notes:

1. All amounts are in £s per week at July 1996 prices. They are rounded to the nearest £1, although estimates are not necessarily accurate to this level.
2. Estimates are for pensioner units. A pensioner unit is defined as a single (non-cohabiting) person over State Pension Age (65 years or above for men and 60 years or above for women), or a couple (married or cohabiting) where the man, defined as the head, is over State Pension Age. Estimates for pensioner couples are broken down by the age of the man.
3. Estimates marked 'n/a' are not applicable. Single men and couples are defined as Pensioner Units only if the man is aged 65 years or above.
4. Means-tested benefits are defined as Income Support, Family Credit, Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit.
5. Levels of means-tested benefit may be particularly affected by mis-reporting as receipt of State Retirement Pension and receipt of Income Support are often confused in the FRS.

Source:

The Pensioners' Incomes Series dataset, based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS).

Number of pensioner units by age and marital status

Thousand

1996–97	*Age*				
	60–64	*65–69*	*70–74*	*75–79*	*80 and over*
Single male pensioners	n/a	250	210	210	260
Single female pensioners	320	550	710	670	980
Pensioner couples	n/a	960	810	500	360

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000 Pensioner Units.
2. Estimates are for pensioner units. A pensioner unit is defined as a single (non-cohabiting) person over State Pension Age (65 years or above for men and 60 years or above for women), or a couple (married or cohabiting) where the man, defined as the head, is over State Pension Age. Estimates for pensioner couples are broken down by the age of the man.
3. Estimates marked 'n/a' are not applicable. Single men and couples are defined as Pensioner Units only if the man is aged 65 years or above.
4. Estimates are not controlled to independent population estimates by the age bands used.

Source:

The Pensioners' Incomes Series dataset, based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS).

Mr. Ashton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many old age pensioners who have become eligible for their benefit since 1 October have not received their pension, and for what reason; and what explanation, or notification, has been given to them as to when they may expect to be paid. [66467]

Mr. Timms: People entitled to Retirement Pension since 1 October 1998 will have received their pension provided they have made a claim. If the contribution record to determine their claims could not be obtained because of the difficulties with the NIRS2, they will have been offered emergency payments and told the reason. I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security gave the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) on 4 November 1998, *Official Report,* columns *603–06.* It is estimated that 3 per cent. of claims fall into this category; this relates to about 1,500 claims a month (or 4,500 between October and December 1998).

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost in each of the next 10 financial years of linking the rate of income support for pensioners to earnings rather than prices. [65424]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the form requested.

In April 1999 the Income Support rate for pensioners will be increased by more than if they had been uprated by earnings.

On this basis the estimated cost to the Income Related benefits of increasing the rate of Income Support (IS) for pensioners by earnings rather than prices would be approximately £250 million in 2000–01 and £520 million in 2001–02. These figures are based on departmental forecasts of the future number of pensioners on Income Related Benefits. Estimated forecasts beyond 2001–02 are not routinely provided on an annual basis, and to do so would incur disproportionate costs.

However, long-term figures on the costs to income related benefits have been estimated using PENSIM, a dynamic simulation model that projects pensioners' incomes into the next century. For illustrative purposes the estimated cost of uprating IS for pensioners in line with earnings by 2010, based on PENSIM, would be around £3.5 billion in today's prices. PENSIM estimates, however, are based on a number of economic and behavioural assumptions. Due to the reliance on assumptions and the time period covered, estimates should be treated with caution, and have been heavily rounded.

Notes:

1. Estimates for 2000–01 and 2001–02 are in cash terms. The estimated cost in 2010 is for illustrative purposes and shown in constant prices. This is consistent with other PENSIM figures in the public domain.

2. Short-term estimates have been rounded to the nearest £10, and the estimate for 2010 is rounded to the nearest half a billion to reflect the uncertainty of the estimate.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish the findings on the pilot studies on income support take-up. [66128]

Angela Eagle: The evaluation of the Income Support take-up pilots is currently underway. Results are expected before the Spring and publication will follow as soon as possible after that.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many small-scale frauds have been prosecuted, and how many prosecutions have been successful, since the publication of the Green Paper "Beating Fraud is Everyone's Business" in July; and what the equivalent figures were for each of the previous five years. [65440]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* As yet we have made no provision to break down national prosecution statistics by the amount of overpayment involved. Keeping the value of a fraud is no guarantee that a fraudster will not be prosecuted. The amount involved is only one of the factors considered when deciding whether it is appropriate to prosecute an individual case.

We shall respond shortly to the consultation on the Green Paper.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps have been taken to implement plans to improve the security culture of staff with particular reference to relating performance appraisal and performance-related pay to security. [65456]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Department's Agencies are taking forward a number of activities to promote security awareness and to ensure that where appropriate, security features are included in key work objectives and in the performance appraisal system.

State Pension

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is the Government's eventual aim to have the basic state pension increased in line with average earnings. [65882]

Mr. Timms: The basic State pension will remain a key building block of the pension system and will continue to be increased at least in line with prices.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many British citizens live in countries in which their British state retirement pension is *(a)* uprated annually and *(b)* not uprated annually. [66097]

Mr. Timms: Around 390,000 pensioners living abroad receive a United Kingdom basic State Pension, which is uprated annually. Around 450,000 receive a basic UK State Pension which is frozen, either at the rate paid on leaving the UK or, if already living abroad, at the rate when first awarded.

Transfer of Information

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his Department's policy on the confidential transfer of information on the names of persons in receipt of means-tested benefits from his Department to individual education authorities solely in order to permit the education authority to establish the number of children in its area who qualify for free school meals. [65815]

Angela Eagle: The Department would not normally disclose confidential personal information to a local education authority without the consent of the individual concerned.

Cross-party Co-operation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with *(a)* the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and *(b)* other Liberal Democrat hon. and right hon. Members concerning the development of Government policy on pensions. [65817]

Mr. Darling: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave him on 14 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *270*.

Contributions Agency

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the estimated costs to the Contributions Agency associated with clearing the current backlogs which have occurred as a result of delays in implementing the NIRS II system. [65992]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available.

The Department's Agencies involved and Andersen Consulting have been working to an agreed plan to stabilise the system. As many of the milestones in this plan have been achieved recovery plans are now being drawn up. This planning needs to be progressed further before a cost can be associated to the recovery exercise.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the amount of compensation likely to be paid to personal pension providers by the Contributions Agency, as a result of delays in implementing the NIRS II system. [65991]

Mr. Timms: The total amount of compensation to be paid to Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes on behalf of their scheme members will be determined by the date on which the posting of 1997–98 Class 1 Contributions is completed. Progress has been made and it is anticipated that the contribution information held for that year should be posted by April 1999.

It is estimated that the total amount of compensation to be paid will be between £35 and £40 million.

Benefit Payments

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what date the agreement with the Post Office not to redirect benefit payments came into operation for each region of the country. [66127]

Angela Eagle: The national agreement with the Post Office not to redirect Social Security related local authority post will come into operation from 1 February 1999. All local authorities will be invited to participate in the initiative later this month.

Incomes

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the numbers currently below the lower earning threshold of national insurance and the number estimated in this category for each of the five decades following the introduction of the state second pension. [65172]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Frank Field, dated 18 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about people earning less than the lower earnings threshold for National Insurance contributions.

The latest estimates available from the UK Labour Force Survey are that, in summer 1998, 2,367,000 employees earned less than £64 per week (the lower limit for Class 1 National Insurance contributions in the current tax year). The vast majority of these, 2,174,000, worked part-time.

Projections for future years are not available.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

A. Hacker and M. Yeoman

Mr. Steen: To ask the Attorney-General when he expects to receive the report from the Director of Public Prosecutions regarding the conduct of the Crown Prosecution Service in relation to the case R *v.* A. Hacker and M. Yeoman tried at the Plymouth Crown Court on 6 January concerning a domestic burglary in Salcombe; and if he will make a statement on the conduct of this case. [66109]

The Attorney-General: The Director of Public Prosecutions received reports about the case of R *v.* Hacker and Yeoman in December 1998 and on 11 January 1999. The Director of Public Prosecutions wrote to the hon. Member on 11 December 1998. I have seen those reports for the purpose of answering this Question. However, the DPP has statutory responsibility for the casework of the Crown Prosecution Service and he will be writing further to the hon. Member.

HEALTH

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62810]

Mr. Denham: Copies of the information requested about the task forces and review panels have been placed in the Library. Information on advisory groups could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Solar Eclipse

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assistance his Department will offer to Cornwall in dealing with problems that may arise from the total eclipse of the sun on 11 August 1999. [65034]

Mr. Denham: Officials from the South West Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive are already working together with the local health authorities and NHS trusts, and other local bodies, to ensure that the NHS has adequate plans in place to meet the demands placed on it during the period of the eclipse.

Isles of Scilly

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial support is available to Scilly Islands residents travelling to mainland hospitals for specialist treatment and advice. [65274]

Mr. Denham: Residents from the Isles of Scilly requiring treatment at mainland hospitals are reimbursed the cost of the flight from the Isles of Scilly to Penzance, less a £5 contribution. Residents claiming income support are reimbursed the full cost of the flight. These payments are made by the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority from their own resources. The health authority does not receive additional funding for these payments.

Senior Medical Practitioners

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will break down the costs of all suspensions of senior medical practitioners on full pay for each of the last five years between *(a)* legal costs, *(b)* administration costs, *(c)* salaries paid to those on suspension and *(d)* any other costs; [65250]

(2) how many NHS suspended senior medical practitioners have been *(a)* disciplined, *(b)* after investigations cleared of any allegations against them and *(c)* had any proceedings against them dropped, in each of the last five years; and how many of those personnel subsequently continued in the employment of the health authority or trust concerned. [65251]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally. The National Health Service Executive monitors doctors suspended for more than six months. Since 31 March 1995, a total of 44 cases of suspension lasting over six months have been reported. As at 30 September 1998, the latest date for which figures are available, 14 hospital and community medical and dental staff, including 9 consultants, have been suspended for over six months. Decisions on whether to suspend, or discipline, a medical practitioner rest with the employing authority or trust. Hospital doctors who are suspended from duty will, in most cases, continue to receive full pay during the period of suspension. The NHS Executive is reviewing current suspension procedures.

NHS Boards

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nominations have been received in calendar year 1998 for non-executive posts on NHS boards, indicating *(a)* the percentage of nominations which have been for (i) women, (ii) people with disabilities and (iii) people from ethnic minorities and *(b)* the number of persons who have been appointed to non-executive posts on NHS boards and the percentage of those who are (1) women, (2) people with disabilities and (3) people from ethnic minorities. [65038]

Mr. Denham: A total of 3,258 applications were received for appointments to be made in 1998 in response to a national advertisement and as a result of nominations by hon. Members and local authorities. Of these, 33.9 per cent. were from women, 3.2 per cent. were from those who declared they had a disability and 10.7 per cent. were people from the ethnic minorities.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State subsequently made 1,490 appointments in 1998 to National Health Service trusts and health authorities. Of these, 50.2 per cent. were women, 11.4 per cent. were from the ethnic minorities and 1.5 per cent. declared they had a disability.

Inequalities Report

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations he has had with *(a)* the Chancellor of the Exchequer and *(b)* the Secretary of State for Social Security on Part 2 (1) of the report of the independent inquiry into inequalities in health chaired by Sir Donald Acheson. [64814]

Ms Jowell: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have had consultations about the report of the Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health (the Acheson report) with a number of our Ministerial colleagues, including my right hon. Friends the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Social Security.

The Acheson report was considered in Cabinet sub-committee prior to its publication. Since then our officials have been in close touch with their counterparts across Whitehall about the report's recommendations. We made it clear at the time of publication that the whole Government were committed to reducing health inequalities and that the Acheson report was an important contribution to that process.

Learning Difficulties

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the NHS budget was spent on the care of patients with learning difficulties in each of the last five years. [65486]

Mr. Denham: The following is the information:

Expenditure on the care of patients with learning difficulties 1993–94 to 1997–98

Year	*Expenditure on learning difficulties*[1]	*Total revenue expenditure*[2]	*Proportion of total revenue expenditure on learning difficulties per cent.*
1993–94	1,132,664	28,860,577	3.92
1994–95	1,126,667	30,271,914	3.72
1995–96	1,157,673	32,162,568	3.60
1996–97	1,234,718	31,612,941	3.91
1997–98	1,285,627	33,269,629	3.86

[1] 1993–94 to 1995–96 health authority financial returns. 1996–97 and 1997–98 health authority annual accounts.

[2] Summarised accounts of the regional and district health authorities and special health authorities for the London postgraduate teaching hospitals and family health services authorities, 1993–94 to 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98.

Health Trust and Authority Appointments

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of appointments to health trusts and health authorities in 1998 were not filled by re-appointment or new appointment immediately upon the completion of the period of service of the existing incumbent; how many such vacancies currently exist; and if he will make a statement. [65660]

Mr. Denham: In 1998, 555 appointments to National Health Service trusts and 318 appointments to health authorities were due to be made when the term of office of a chair or non-executive expired. 17.1 per cent. of the NHS trust appointments and 22.6 per cent. of the health authority appointments were not made before the due date. At 12 January 1999, 8.8 per cent. of the NHS trust and 2.5 per cent. of the health authority appointments remained unfilled. Great efforts are always made to ensure that all appointments are made on time. Any delays are due to the need to ensure that the right person is chosen for the job.

Older People

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the work force issues identified by the Health Advisory Service 2000 report, "Not Because They Are Old", with particular reference to staffing levels, skill mix, education and development, management arrangements and support systems. [65322]

Mr. Denham *(holding answer 14 January 1999):* We are taking a number of steps which will help to address issues raised in the report. These include the publication of the framework for the management of human resources for the whole of the National Health Service, "Working Together, securing a quality work force for the NHS", which sets targets for local employers in areas such as improved recruitment and retention. We have also consulted widely on modern arrangements to underpin quality in the NHS including the development of lifelong learning and will be issuing guidance on continuing professional development.

Dentists

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve the procedures for the establishment of new NHS dentists with particular reference to the length of time taken to reach a decision. [66056]

Mr. Denham: The vast majority of dentists are self-employed, and it is therefore up to them where and when they establish themselves. The establishment of Personal Dental Services pilots requires the approval of the Secretary of State, and we have no plans to change this process. Funding through the Investing In Dentistry scheme, which may result in new practices being set up, is also approved by the Secretary of State, and we are considering whether the operation of this scheme can be improved.

Medicines Control Agency

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has recently received from *(a)* right hon. and hon. Members and *(b)* others in relation to the Medicines Control Agency Consultation Document MLX 249; and how many of these representations *(a)* broadly supported and *(b)* broadly opposed the detail of the proposals. [65723]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* We have received 69 letters from hon. and right hon. Members and 278 representations from other interested bodies and individuals. Three representations broadly support the proposals. The remainder are critical of the proposals to some degree.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend the powers of the Medicines Control Agency; and if he will make a statement. [66362]

Ms Jowell: The powers of the licensing authority, of which the Medicines Control Agency is an executive arm, are set out in the Medicines Act 1968 and secondary legislation including the Medicines for Human Use (Marketing Authorisations Etc.) Regulations 1994. There are no plans to extend those powers.

However, the MCA's Consultation Letter MLX 249 proposes amendments to these Regulations. The proposed amendments relate to a new statutory procedure for determinations by the licensing authority of whether a product is a medicinal product requiring licensing. The procedure would allow for representations to be made against a provisional determination that a product requires licensing. If a final determination is made, it will be sufficient evidence for the purposes of legal proceedings that the product requires licensing under the Regulations, unless it can be shown that the determination was made unreasonably or has been annulled. There is a further proposal that, when a final determination has been made that a product requires licensing, the licensing authority be able to serve a notice in writing on a person requiring that he refrain from placing the product on the market or otherwise marketing the product, and that it be an offence to breach such a notice. Decisions of the licensing authority would be subject to judicial review or other challenge in the civil courts.

When consideration of responses to the consultation is complete, we will consider whether and what legislative proposals should be put before Parliament.

Neurology Services

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the average waiting times for out-patient appointments in neurology clinics in each of the last two years for which figures are available. [66060]

Mr. Denham: Data on average waiting times for outpatient appointments are not collected centrally. However, data are available on the percentage of patients seen within 13 weeks and 26 weeks of written general practitioner referral and the table provides this information for 1996–97, 1997–98 and the first two quarters of 1998–99.

Waiting times for neurology first outpatient appointments: Trust based (England)

Year	Quarter	Of those GP written referrals seen, the percentage who waited: less than 13 weeks	less than 26 weeks
1996–97	1	71	95
1996–97	2	69	95
1996–97	3	69	95
1996–97	4	69	95
1997–98	1	73	95
1997–98	2	70	95
1997–98	3	68	93
1997–98	4	67	92
1998–99	1	68	92
1998–99	2	66	92

Portsmouth NHS Hospitals Trust

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with *(a)* Portsmouth NHS Hospitals Trust, *(b)* Portsmouth & SE Hants Health Authority and *(c)* others this year about the admissions and treatment of patients at Portsmouth hospitals; what actions he has taken; and what plans he has to visit hospitals in Portsmouth. [65750]

Mr. Denham: We have expressed our thanks to all those working in the National Health Services for the huge effort they have put in to make sure everyone is getting the treatment and care they need over the winter months.

An extra £1.672 million has been allocated to Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Health Authority to help them cope with winter pressures. The South East Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive has been working closely with the local national Health Service in Portsmouth about the admission and treatment of patients this year, and will continue to do so.

We have no plans at present to visit hospitals in this area.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the number of general practitioner appointments with patients which will be lost each year as a result of general practitioner participation in the administration of primary care groups; [65920]

(2) what resources he is making available to general practitioner surgeries to allow them to replace general practitioner time taken up in administration of primary care groups; [65921]

(3) what resources he has made available for repaying the expenses of provisionally appointed members of primary care groups up to 1 April 1999. [65922]

Mr. Denham: We have allocated £135 million to health authorities as a central contribution towards health authorities funding of the running costs of primary care groups in 1999–2000. Some of this will be used by Primary Care Groups to fund locum or other costs incurred by general practitioner primary care group board members. In addition we have made available £31 million this financial year to health authorities to help support the development of primary care groups.

We have agreed that locum/compensatory payments can be paid to practices to enable them to cover such absences. In some cases cover will be provided from within the practice. We therefore do not expect any deterioration in the quality or level of service to patients to result from GP membership of primary care groups. Indeed we are confident that Primary Care Groups will lead to improvements in services to patients. One of their key functions is to develop primary care.

Long-term Care

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the Royal Commission's report into the funding of long-term care. [66110]

Mr. Hutton: We understand that the Royal Commission is finalising its work, and its report should be published shortly.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to control the costs of Meat Hygiene Service inspections. [64284]

Mr. Rooker: Two of the principal objectives of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) are to deliver value for money in the provision of efficient and high quality services and to achieve the financial and performance targets set by Ministers. Indeed the Agency has met all its performance targets since it was launched in April 1995.

The Chief Executive of the MHS is responsible to the Minister for the Agency's performance and operations. He is accountable for securing efficiency and economical conduct of the Agency's business. The Agency works in line with government tendering rules to optimise value for money. For example the MHS makes extensive use of contract Official Veterinary Surgeons (OVSs) which it obtains by means of national competitive tendering procedures. These are in line with Government purchasing policy and ensure that the best value for money is obtained for plant operators.

My ministerial colleagues and I monitor closely the financial performance of the Agency. Indeed, MHS charges for each financial year are subject to ministerial agreement before being implemented. We are satisfied that the MHS is meeting its objective of delivering value for money in the provision of efficient and high quality services.

Food Standards and Safety Group

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the current structure of the Joint Food Standards and Safety Group. [64959]

Mr. Rooker: The Joint Food Safety and Standards Group works across Departmental boundaries, bringing together those parts of MAFF and the Department of

Health that have responsibility for food safety and standards matters. The Group currently comprises around 380 officials who report to both Agriculture and Health Ministers. It is organised into 11 divisions, including two that are responsible for developing and implementing plans for the Food Standards Agency. The divisions deal with the following main areas of policy: additives and novel foods; food labelling, food authenticity and compositional standards; food contaminants; animal feedingstuffs and fertilisers; food hygiene; meat hygiene; veterinary advice on public health matters; radiological safety; nutrition and diet; and enforcement issues. I shall shortly place in the Library of the House an organogram that illustrates these arrangements.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many reports the Joint Food Safety and Standards Group has so far made to Ministers; and when the next report is expected. [64958]

Mr. Rooker: The Joint Food Safety and Standards Group brings together the officials in those parts of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Health that are responsible for food safety and standards matters. It is a set unit of civil servants rather than a body that reports periodically. Since the Group was established on 1 September 1997 it has provided ongoing policy and executive support to Agriculture and Health Ministers.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what dates the Joint Food Safety and Standards Group has met since it was established; and on what dates this group is scheduled to meet in 1999. [65050]

Mr. Rooker: The Joint Food Safety and Standards Group brings together the officials in those parts of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Health that are responsible for food safety and standards matters. It is a set unit of civil servants rather than a body that meets periodically. Since it was established on 1 September 1997 the Group has provided ongoing policy and executive support to Ministers in both Departments. It will continue to do so until the Food Standards Agency, of which it is expected to form the operational core, is established.

Milk

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Department has made of *(a)* the potential side effects on consumers of milk and *(b)* the effect on milk output and price, of the use of bovine somatotrophin. [65658]

Mr. Rooker: Bovine somatotrophin (BST) is a hormone produced naturally by all cows and is present in small quantities in all cows milk. Applications for authorisation of the product have been very carefully assessed by various expert committees in the UK and Europe and all agree that the applications meet the statutory criteria of safety, quality and efficacy. Safety includes the safety of the consumer. Its use in the EU is subject to a moratorium. If permitted, it would be subject to veterinary control.

The European Commission has reported that the productivity increase from the use of BST is estimated to be in the range of 5 per cent. to 20 per cent. However, since EU milk production is constrained by quotas, it is unlikely that there would be any significant impact on either output or price.

Natural Predators

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of natural predators on the levels of damage to agriculture caused by *(a)* rabbits, *(b)* voles, *(c)* rats and *(d)* mice; and if he will list the predators concerned in each case. [65097]

Mr. Morley: No assessment has been made of the effect of natural predators on the levels of damage caused to agriculture by pests. Rabbits and rodents cause considerable economic loss and any level of natural predation is likely to be beneficial.

Regional Flood Defence Committees

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the grants awarded by his Department to the South West Regional Flood Defence Committee in each year from 1993–94 to 1998–99 by *(a)* amount and *(b)* percentage change over the previous year. [65096]

Mr. Morley: Grant is awarded to the Environment Agency by means of Grant Earning Ceilings (GECs) which represent the total of approved flood defence capital expenditure in respect of which grant can be claimed. GECs reflect commitments on ongoing schemes and a national assessment of the priority and urgency of new schemes. Therefore year on year comparisons should be treated with caution. It is also the case that the Environment Agency's South West Regional Flood Defence Committee (RFDC) has not taken up the original award fully in all years.

I list below (i) the GECs originally awarded each year to the South West RFDC, (ii) the percentage change compared to the previous year's original GEC and (iii) the final outturn for each year.

Year	*Original GEC (£ million)*	*Percentage change*	*Final outturn (£ million)*
1993–94	5.8	+4	3.9
1994–95	5.6	−3	3.2
1995–96	5.0	−11	4.3
1996–97	4.5	−10	5.1
1997–98	3.0	−33	2.9
1998–99	2.2	−27	[1]—

[1] Not available

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much he plans to award each of the regional flood defence committees in 1999–2000. [65095]

Mr. Morley: I have announced the award of 1999–2000 Grant Earning Ceilings (GECs) to the Environment Agency's Regional and Local Flood Defence Committees as follows for their core capital programmes. In addition further funding for flood warning improvements is being provided to the Agency on a national basis.

£ million

RFDC area/district	1999–2000 GEC
Anglia	
Essex	2.6
Great Ouse	0.8
Lincolnshire	6.0
Norfolk/Suffolk	8.8
Welland/Nene	0.9
North West	5.1
Northumbria	0.0
Severn Trent	4.7
South West	2.2
Southern	
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	0.4
Kent	1.4
Sussex	2.8
Thames	19.2
Wessex	
Avon/Dorset	0.9
Bristol/Avon	0.0
Somerset	2.6
Yorkshire	7.6

Environment Agency (Flood Defence Work)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what legislative authority the Environment Agency has to market-test or contract-out its flood defence emergency and routine maintenance functions. [65094]

Mr. Morley: Under Section 37(1)(a) of the Environment Act 1995, the Environment Agency may do anything which, in its opinion, is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, carrying out its functions. This would include the market testing or contracting out of its flood defence emergency and routine maintenance functions.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what instructions *(a)* the Minister and *(b)* the Environment Agency has issued on the question of market testing or contracting out aspects of its flood defence work. [65093]

Mr. Morley: The Government have not issued specific instructions to the Environment Agency about the market testing of its flood defence work. Rather, the Agency is consistently encouraged to continue to deliver improvements in efficiency, and market testing and contracting out feature among the measures that the Agency may wish to use to achieve its efficiency objectives.

The Agency's Financial Memorandum generally requires that all contracts for whatever function are designed to secure value for money and should be let on a competitive basis unless the Agency is satisfied there are good reasons to the contrary.

Also, for flood defence capital works to be eligible for MAFF grant, the Agency is generally required to tender on a competitive basis as set out in the MAFF Grant Memorandum.

The Agency has issued internal instructions to implement the requirements of the Financial Memorandum and the MAFF Grant Memorandum.

Pesticides

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to discuss with his counterparts in other European Union member states the establishment of a pesticide policy across the Community. [65415]

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Minister takes the lead as respects agricultural pesticides; the lead on other pesticides (and biocides) lies with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Directive 91/414/EEC already provides a common basis for the regulation of agricultural pesticides across the Community. Until it is fully operative, the Directive permits the various national arrangements to continue. This transition, from national to harmonised regulation, has proved more lengthy than originally envisaged but the great majority of rules are in place for chemical pesticides and significant progress has been made regarding those for biological pesticides.

The European Commission has finally recognised that progress needs to be more rapid and last October produced a working paper proposing ways of achieving this. UK Ministers and officials will play a full part in discussions of the Commission's proposals and will seek to advance practical measures to make the Directive fully effective. However, we shall continue to maintain our first priority—the protection of people and the environment.

Lindane

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the expected timetable for the UK regulatory authorities to consider the report being produced by the European Commission on the environmental and health effects of the insecticide Lindane; and if the report will be published. [66015]

Mr. Rooker: The Austrian authorities submitted an initial evaluation of Lindane to the European Commission last month, as part of the EU's routine review programme for plant protection products. The process of peer review and decision-making by the Community is likely to take until the first half of the year 2000 but could be expedited if issues of human or environmental safety arise. The first phase, scientific peer review, is scheduled to run between March and October. The UK regulatory authorities will participate in this work and will therefore be considering the Austrian report ahead of the meetings.

If action is called for by the Austrian evaluation, the Government will not hesitate to take steps or to press the Commission to do so. After a decision has been taken by the Commission, the report from the decision making process will be made publicly available.

Vitamin B

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what guidance he has given to the departmental Ad Hoc Export Advisory Committee on Vitamins and Mineral Supplements in the light of research commissioned by his Department on vitamin B. [65757]

Mr. Rooker: The Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals will consider all relevant scientific information on the safety of vitamins and minerals, including any which may be available from research commissioned by this Department.

Dietary Supplements

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the criteria he will operate to allow unrestricted sale of dietary supplements. [65758]

Mr. Rooker: Dietary supplements which are classed as foods are subject to the requirements of the food law. Provided that they comply with those requirements they may be freely sold.

Grain Stores

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the amounts of pesticides used in grain stores in the UK. [66014]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry has collected pesticides usage data covering the agricultural and horticultural sectors since the 1960s and reports analysing all these data have been published. Information on grain stores is gathered every four years; the next survey will be this year for storage in 1998–99 of the 1998 harvest.

Comparison in usage data between the last surveys in 1994–95 and previous ones is difficult because of changes in grain store practice, survey methodologies and quantities of grain surveyed. However indications are that use in commercial stores has gone down substantially—the weight of pesticide per tonne of grain was only a third of the 1985–86 level—while use in farm stores appears to have increased—the weight of pesticide per tonne of grain was up by about a fifth on 1990–91 figures. The changes result from stricter hygiene requirements of grain buyers and improved administrative arrangements avoiding unnecessary treatments. There has been a move away from the practice of admixing pesticides with the grain towards treating the store's walls and floors to ensure no pests are left between emptying and re-filling.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research his Department has funded into the engineering design of grain stores to enable grain to be safely stored without the use of added chemicals. [66012]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) has a strategic research programme on grain storage which includes a project on the development of modified atmosphere application systems for use within grain stores, as an alternative to control by pesticides. The MAFF work underpins more applied research funded by the levy body, the Home Grown Cereals Authority (HGCA).

Sand Dunes

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to the letter of 30 September 1998 from the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), for fisheries and the countryside to the hon. Member for Linlithgow concerning habitats, if he will make a statement on the action planned for sand dunes. [65384]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, a costed Habitat Action Plan for coastal sand dunes is being prepared and is due to be published later this year. It will include specific targets for the protection and enhancement of sand dunes and a list of actions to help achieve these targets.

A large proportion of sand dunes is designated as SSSIs and twenty-one sites have been proposed to the European Commission as candidate Special Areas of Conservation under the Habitats Directive.

The Countryside Stewardship Scheme includes various measures to encourage farmers and land managers to improve the natural beauty and diversity of the countryside. These include payments for managing sand dunes. The Scheme is voluntary and competitive, and agreements under it run for 10 years. Similar measures apply in Scotland under the Countryside Premium Scheme.

School Milk

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from the agricultural industry on the re-introduction of free milk in schools. [66069]

Mr. Morley: The main representations for free school milk have come from a parents pressure group called Milk For Schools. Farming and industry organisations have, however, called for various improvements in the present arrangements.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will assess the benefits of reintroducing free milk in schools. [66068]

Mr. Morley: Milk can play an important part in a balanced diet but it is only one of many such foods. For this reason, and due to financial constraints, the Government have no plans to assess the benefits of reintroducing free milk in schools.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has held with Professor Bourne since the publication of the latest statistics on TB breakdowns. [66081]

Mr. Rooker: The latest TB breakdown statistics to be published are those which I sent the hon. Member on 29 July 1998. Since then my right hon. Friend the Minister and I have met Professor Bourne together on one occasion, and separately on one occasion each.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list by county the numbers of herd breakdowns to tuberculosis in each quarter of each of the last three years. [66082]

Mr. Rooker: Figures for the numbers of new confirmed herd breakdowns by county are not available on a quarterly basis. The data are not recorded in a manner which would permit quarterly figures to be constructed. Annual figures are retained on a county basis from 1997 and I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 2 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *318*, and my subsequent letter of 29 July 1998, which also listed provisional figures for the first six months of 1998.

Warfarin

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to *(a)* restrict and *(b)* prevent the use of warfarin for pest control. [66083]

Mr. Rooker: Warfarin is presently permitted in the UK for specified pest control uses under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986. However, it also falls within the scope of the emerging EU regulatory regimes for plant protection products and biocidal products.

The plant protection uses of warfarin are being reviewed by the EU Commission as part of a programme that will eventually cover all compounds used in such products. The rules for the review programme put the onus on companies, wishing to continue to market such products, to provide data to address possible risks to people and the environment. Despite several opportunities, we understand that no company has yet provided and adequate data package for warfarin. The Commission are therefore likely to propose the restriction or removal of plant protection uses of warfarin and the Government would be minded to support such a step. We are, however, aware of the implications for the forestry sector; the Forestry Commission is encouraging manufacturers to provide data and is urgently researching alternative control methods.

This would not have any direct implication for the use of warfarin to protect public health as opposed to crops. The Biocidal Products Directive applies to public health products and, although these will be reviewed in due course, that review is not yet under way.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 19 January 1999

DEFENCE

101 Battalion REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will name the officers and staff in Land Command who recommended the transfer of HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry. [65025]

Mr. Doug Henderson: It is not our practice to identify individual officials in this way under Exemption 2 (Internal discussion and advice) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many officer vacancies exist in 101 Battalion REME in Chorley; and if he will estimate the number of officer posts in 101 Battalion REME that are likely to become vacant during 1999. [65022]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There are currently no officer vacancies at 101 Battalion REME in Chorley. It is not possible to gauge the number of officer posts in 101 Battalion REME that may become vacant in 1999, but we expect to have no difficulty achieving full staffing.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will refer back to Commander in Chief Land Command the decision to transfer HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry. [65020]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I am satisfied that the advice that Land Command provided Ministers to inform their decision on the transfer of Headquarters 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry was sound.

RAF (Support Personnel)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many technical support personnel are required to support the deployment away from existing RAF bases of flights of four or eight Tornado aircraft; and how many will be required for similar flights of Eurofighter aircraft. [65754]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The number of technical support personnel deployed to support four or eight Tornado aircraft is dependent on several factors, including the operational requirement, the flying task, the number of hours to be worked in any one day and the amount of support available from the Host Nation. However, a flight of four or eight aircraft would be likely to generate a minimum of 82 and 144 technical support personnel respectively. An exact assessment of the numbers of technical support personnel required for Eurofighter has yet to be carried out, but preliminary studies indicate that approximately the same number of personnel will be required.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many technical support personnel are required to support the deployment away from existing RAF bases of flights of four or eight Jaguar aircraft. [66177]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The number of technical support personnel deployed to support four or eight Jaguar aircraft is dependent on several factors, including the operational requirement, the flying task, the number of hours to be worked in any one day and the amount of support available from the Host Nation. However, a flight of four or eight aircraft would be likely to generate a minimum of 65 and 110 technical support personnel respectively.

Aircraft

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast service life of *(a)* Eurofighter and *(b)* Jaguar aircraft engines. [65732]

Mr. Spellar: The forecast service life of the Eurofighter engine will be aligned to the predicted life of the whole aircraft, which is 25 years or 6,000 flying hours.

The Jaguar aircraft entered RAF service in 1973. On current plans, the Jaguar fleet, including the engines, will leave service in the later part of the next decade.

Modern aircraft engines are of modular design. Each module has an approved life and may be replaced during the life of the whole engine in accordance with established maintenance policy.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast service life of *(a)* Harrier GR7 and *(b)* Jaguar aircraft airframes. [65731]

Mr. Spellar: The Harrier GR7 aircraft entered RAF service in 1987. On current plans, the Harrier GR7 fleet will achieve a service life of some 30 years.

The Jaguar aircraft entered RAF service in 1973. On current plans, the Jaguar fleet will leave service in the later part of the next decade.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what service life has been achieved to date and what is forecast for Canberra aircraft in service with the RAF. [65733]

Mr. Spellar: The RAF Canberra fleet comprises two marks of the aircraft, the T4 and the PR9. The T4s entered service between 1954 and 1955 and have served some 44 years. The PR9s entered service between 1959 and 1960 and have served some 39 years. On current plans, the Canberra fleet will leave service in the early part of the next decade.

Ships

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the interval between major refits for HMS Ark Royal. [65730]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The first refit of HMS Ark Royal has not yet taken place.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast service life of each of the three aircraft carriers in service with the Royal Navy; and

what will be the *(a)* design life and *(b)* design interval between major refits of the proposed replacement carriers. [65910]

Mr. Spellar: The forecast service life for HMS Invincible, HMS Illustrious and HMS Ark Royal is approximately 30 years. We plan to replace these carriers from around 2012 with two new, larger vessels. The planned service life of the new ships is a minimum of 30 years. The new carriers will not undergo lengthy major refits in the traditional sense, but will instead undergo shorter, but more frequent periods of maintenance lasting about six months every five or six years.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the average time between major refits for *(a)* Type 22 and *(b)* Type 23 ships. [65753]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Typically, the average time between major refits for RN Frigates and Destroyers is in excess of 7 years.

Surveillance Towers (Northern Ireland)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the intended strategic purpose of the surveillance towers on hilltop sites in the South Armagh area; and what factors would be taken into account in a review of these towers. [65998]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The primary function of the towers on hilltop sites is to protect Security Force bases in the South Armagh area and patrols conducted from them. As with all military establishments in Northern Ireland, the requirement for the towers is kept under continuous review to ensure the level of support provided to the RUC is consistent with the prevailing security situation and the assessment of the threat posed by terrorist organisations.

PRIME MINISTER

Special Advisers

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list the assumed or equivalent civil service grades of each of the special advisers employed in his Office; [65915]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *458–59*, on special advisers, if he will list the assumed or equivalent civil service grade of each of the listed special advisers. [65916]

The Prime Minister: Special Advisers are employed under terms and conditions set out in the Model Contract for Special Advisers. Special Advisers stand outside the departmental hierarchy and do not equate to particular civil service grades.

Former Ministers

Mr. Brady: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he made of the extent to which there was a conflict of interest in the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), having a loan from the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) at a time when the right hon. Gentleman's Department was investigating the business affairs of the hon. Member. [66456]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Since the former Secretary of State was not involved in the Department of Trade and Industry's inquiries into certain allegations relating to companies with which my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) had been involved, I am satisfied that no conflict of interest existed.

Defence Restructuring

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Prime Minister what is the current composition of the Ministerial Group on the Restructuring of the European Aerospace and Defence Industry (MISC 5). [66847]

The Prime Minister: As the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry may have to take decisions under the competition legislation on the proposed merger which BAe and GEC have announced in principle, I have decided that, while these issues are under consideration, it would be preferable for the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry not to participate in the work of MISC 5 in order to avoid any risk of it appearing that he had prejudged the issues involved. I have therefore appointed the Secretary of State for Defence as the Chairman of the Ministerial Group. The DTI will continue to be represented by the Minister for Energy and Industry.

Devolution

Mr. Curry: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the draft concordats drawn up to govern relations between the Government and the Executives of *(a)* the Scottish Parliament and *(b)* the National Assembly for Wales. [66189]

The Prime Minister: Work is progressing on concordats both within the Scottish and Welsh Offices and in Whitehall Departments, as it is of course in Northern Ireland as well. None of them have yet been published.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what consultations he had with *(a)* leaders of the British Muslim community and *(b)* British Muslim academics before endorsing the bombing of Iraq. [65393]

The Prime Minister: The Government make every effort to ensure that they are aware of the views of the British Muslim community and that their policies are understood by that community. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary met members of the Muslim press before and after Operation Desert Fox, and gave an address to the Muslim Council of Britain. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett) also holds regular meetings with representatives of the Muslim community at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *143*, concerning military action against Iraq, by whom the reasons are well understood. [66493]

The Prime Minister: I was referring to our European Union partners in my answer of 12 January. They know why we took military action against Iraq because we have briefed them fully on our reasons for doing so.

Fish Conservation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 962, what steps he plans to take to reduce the discarding of edible fish under the quota system. [66114]

The Prime Minister: Government policies which will reduce discarding of edible fish include reducing fishing effort, improving the selectivity of fishing gear and introducing fixed quota allocations.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 962, what steps he plans to take with other European countries to reform the Common Fisheries Policy; and if he will make a statement. [66113]

The Prime Minister: The Government will continue to work with other Member States and the European Commission to achieve more effective and consistent enforcement of fisheries rules across the Community; integrate environmental considerations more fully into the Common Fisheries Policy to make it a more effective instrument for conserving fish stocks and the wider marine environment; apply structural and conservation measures in a way that achieves a sustainable future for the fishing industry; and improve the regional dimension of the CFP so that it is more sensitive to local differences.

TREASURY

Financial Services

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what responses he has received to the draft Financial Services and Markets Bill; and if he will make a statement. [66812]

Ms Hewitt: The response to publication of the draft Bill in July 1998 showed strong support for the creation of a single statutory regulator. There is widespread interest in ensuring that the Financial Services Authority continues to operate a fair, open and accountable manner. The Government intend to clarify and, where necessary, to amend the Bill to meet valid concerns raised on consultation and in response to the current inquiry by the Treasury Committee and the intended pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee of both Houses.

In the meantime, we have decided to strengthen further the openness and accountability of the new regulatory regime. We intend to include in the Bill a statutory requirement for the FSA to establish practitioner and consumer panels, underpinning the arrangements the FSA has already put in place. We also intend to include in the Bill a requirement for the FSA to hold an annual open meeting at which the Chairman and others can be questioned on the FSA's policy and performance. The Bill will also include a requirement that the non-executive members should form a majority on the FSA Board.

The statutory requirements in the draft Bill for the FSA to consult on rules will be improved and will include a requirement that proposed rules and rule changes be accompanied by an explanation of how they relate to the FSA's objectives. The consultation requirements will also be extended so as to apply to standing guidance of general application.

The draft Bill requires the FSA to have in place arrangements for independent investigation of complaints. The FSA will be required under the Bill to consult on these arrangements. We also intend that in addition to publishing the conclusions of his investigation the investigator should be able to report on the FSA's response to any recommendations made.

The FSA will be accountable to Ministers and through them to Parliament. Its annual report under the Bill will be a key aspect of that accountability. The draft Bill enables the Treasury to require the FSA to report on specific matters. We will begin discussions with the FSA with a view to publishing an agreed list of matters to be covered in the report. We also intend that the Treasury should be given new powers to commission and publish periodic independent value for money audits of the FSA.

The draft Bill provides the Treasury with a number of powers to make statutory instruments. Drafts of key orders will be published for public consultation shortly. We will also undertake appropriate consultation on the other orders.

Former Ministers

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when he was first informed of the loan by the previous Paymaster General to the previous Secretary of State for Trade and Industry; [66457]

(2) if he will list the Ministers and officials in his Department with whom he discussed the loan by the previous Paymaster General to the previous Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the dates on which he had such discussions; [66461]

(3) what discussions he had about the loan by the previous Paymaster General to the previous Secretary of State for Trade and Industry with the Prime Minister; and on what date he first had such discussions; [66459]

(4) what discussions he had about the loan by the previous Paymaster General to the previous Secretary of State for Trade and Industry with his adviser, Mr. Charlie Whelan; and on what date he first had such discussions. [66458]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* This was and is a matter involving the former Paymaster General and the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. It is not a matter for Treasury Ministers.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what matters or correspondence involving building societies were dealt with by the previous Paymaster General between 1 May 1997 and the date of his resignation. [66445]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The previous Paymaster General had no ministerial responsibility for building societies.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what contact he has had with the Inland Revenue regarding the taxation position of the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), the hon. Member's business interests and those offshore trusts connected with the hon. Member. [66446]

Dawn Primarolo: Treasury Ministers have no ministerial responsibility for or involvement in the tax affairs of individuals.

Financial Support

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to disclose what financial support he has received since 1 May 1997 for the development of his economic policies and the sources of that financial support. [66448]

Mr. Gordon Brown: My policy is to act in accordance with the Ministerial Code and with the House of Commons rules for registration of interests.

WALES

National Assembly

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the appointments of officials to the National Assembly made to date; and if he will estimate, in each case, their annual cost. [64503]

Mr. Michael: In preparation for the National Assembly for Wales, the following appointments have been made to the Office of the Presiding Officer and the Executive Secretariat of the Assembly.

	Pay band (£)
Counsel General	77,840–113,680
Office of the Presiding Officer	
Senior Director, Assembly Business	71,250–107,300
Director, Assembly Business (and project manager for the establishment of the Office of the Presiding Officer)	54,230–90,400
Assistant Director, Public and Research Services	40,420–63,490
Chief Translator	27,043–41,935
Deputy Head Translation Services (Interpretation)	20,723–31,978
Executive Secretariat	
Head of Executive Secretariat	40,420–63,490
Implementation Unit	
2 x Pay Band F (G7)	27,043–41,935
2 x Pay Band D (HEO)	15,990–24,464
3 x Pay Band C (EO)	12,240–18,360
2 x Pay Band B (AO and PS)	9,536–13,700

The full year costs of the Implementation Unit would be £215,400 based on the 1998–99 projected average grade costs. The unit has a limited life span and will exist for 6 months.

A number of further appointments, for example for translators and for general administrative staff, are currently in train.

All of these costs are included in the estimated additional running costs.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his estimate is of *(a)* the number of people who will be employed by the National Assembly and *(b)* the total cost of their employment to public funds. [64529]

Mr. Michael: The bulk of the existing staff of the Welsh Office will transfer to work for the Assembly but the Assembly will require more staff than those currently employed in the Welsh Office; the Explanatory & Financial Memorandum to the Government of Wales Bill estimated the number at about 100. The annual additional running costs of the Assembly have been estimated as £15 million to £20 million more than the costs of running the Welsh Office, which are currently some £70 million. These additional costs include the pay and allowances of Assembly members and the accommodation and information technology requirements of members and staff as well as the additional staff costs.

Crickhowell House

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if the arrangement originally entered into by the Welsh Office for the lease of Crickhowell House, Cardiff, were in line with Treasury rules for the leasing of such property; what study was undertaken of comparable buildings in the area; and what rents were sought for leases of such alternative options. [65282]

Mr. Michael: A copy of the option appraisal prepared by Welsh Health Common Services Authority (WHCSA) in respect of moving to new accommodation on a single site was submitted by the Department to Treasury for approval on 17 May 1991. Treasury advised that there were no objections to the proposed option provided that the Department's Accounting Officer was satisfied that taking into account all elements of the appraisal, financial and non-financial, the option represented the best value for money.

Eight developers with 11 sites were approached in January 1991 and seven of these made outline proposals. Refinements of the brief and the proposals led to a short list of three by June 1991. Of the three proposals, one was eliminated for financial reasons, and 2 were broadly similar. Having taken independent legal and property advice and having considered rents and other financial aspects, WHCSA's Board recommended the Grovesnor Waterside bid for providing leased accommodation at Crickhowell House.

I have asked the Chief Executive of WHCSA to send the right hon. Member a copy of the post project evaluation report prepared by the Authority.

European Structural Funds

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the members of the European Objective I Task Force and the organisation or councils they represent. [65413]

Mr. Hain: The Wales European Task Force, which was set up to look at the use of Structural Funds across all of Wales, consists of the major social and economic partner organisations with an interest in economic development. Except where indicated membership is for organisations, not individuals. The membership is as below:

WDA

WLGA

Council of Welsh TECs

Heads of Higher Education institutions in Wales

Fforwm

Welsh Council for Voluntary Action

TUC

CBI

Federation of Small Businesses

Equal Opportunities Commission

Wales Tourist Board
National Farmers' Union
Farmers Union of Wales
Countryside Council for Wales
Mr. Hywel Ceri Jones
Wayne David MEP (representing all Welsh MEPs)
The Four Regional Economic Fora
The Environment Agency.

This membership may be varied as the work of this task force moves forward.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the use of private jets by ministers in his Department since 2 May 1997. [65673]

Mr. Michael: As part of visits to British Aerospace the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), joined the company's regular shuttle services between Filton, Hawarden and Toulouse. These flights were at no cost to the Department and were not in place of scheduled flights. Private jets have not been used by Welsh Office Ministers on any other occasion since 2 May 1997.

Long-stay Care Hospitals

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives he proposes in his policies for long-stay care hospitals. [66034]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Many long stay units are small, modern or updated facilities which have a clear, locally agreed, role and these will continue. The remaining large mental and learning disability hospitals will be closed as and when resources allow but only when there are facilities in place to deliver a safe and effective service.

Nurses

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on nurses' pay. [66030]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Review body for Nursing Staff, Midwives and Health Visitors which considers nurses pay has recently submitted its report to the Prime Minister. A decision on its recommendations is likely to be announced shortly.

NHS (Resources)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what new money is scheduled for the NHS in the forthcoming financial year; and if he will make a statement. [66032]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Comprehensive Spending Review provided an additional £175 million to NHS Wales in 1999–2000 bringing total provision to £2,654.9 million. This represented a 7.1 per cent. increase on 1998–99 provision.

Pensioners (Free Transport)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the estimated annual cost of the proposal to allow unlimited free public transport in Wales to people of pensionable age; from what sources those costs would be met; and if he will make a statement. [65907]

Mr. Hain: I am consulting local authorities and bus operators on how best to move to free concessionary bus travel for pensioners, which I expect to see phased in over the next two to three years. Until this work has been completed it is not possible to put a precise figure on the cost of the proposal. The method of funding the additional costs will be a matter for the National Assembly to determine.

Housing (Flintshire)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* starts and *(b)* completions of Housing Association homes there have been in Flintshire in each of the past three years; and if he will make a statement. [66418]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Starts and completions achieved by Housing Associations in the last three financial years are as follows:

	1997–98	*1996–97*	*1995–96*
Starts			
Flintshire	145	118	207
Wales	2,468	3,200	3,688
Completions			
Flintshire	90	213	250
Wales	2,989	3,717	3,799

Over this period Flintshire has received approximately 5 per cent. of the Housing Association programme in Wales. Resources have been made available to Housing Associations in Flintshire to achieve a similar outcome in financial year 1998–99.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales in what ways he plans to assist Flintshire County Council to repair and modernise its housing stock; and if he will make a statement. [66416]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Flintshire County Council's Basic Credit approval (BCA) for 1999–2000 is £8.833 million. It is for the Council to decide on the capital expenditure that it wishes to support from its BCA, including housing. In addition to the BCA supplementary Credit Approvals (SCAs) of £100 million are also available to local authorities in Wales to support strategic housing projects. All local authorities have been invited to submit proposals by the end of January for the use of those SCAs.

Job Opportunities

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to increase the diversity of job opportunities outside the M4 and A55 corridors. [66398]

Mr. Hain: Increasing job opportunities and spreading economic prosperity to all parts of Wales is a key objective for the Government. It is being pursued through the Strategic Guidance to the WDA and will be fundamental to the aims of the National Development Strategy covering EC Structural Funds, currently being prepared by the European Task Force.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Motor Neurone Disease

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will respond to the Motor Neurone Disease Association's report on the effect of the Benefit Integrity Project on people with Motor Neurone Disease. [65591]

Mr. Bayley: I responded to the Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Association on 19 January 1999.

The Benefit Integrity Project (BIP) has been subject to continuous review and prior to the Association's report being published in November 1998, significant improvements had been made to the way in which the BIP operated. Since 5 October, people with MND who are receiving the higher rate of mobility component together with the highest rate of the care component of Disability Living Allowance were exempt from the operation of the Project.

We plan that BIP should be replaced by a new system of review which is part of the routine administration of the benefit and which is both sensitive and fair. We are currently discussing our proposals with the Disability Benefits Forum.

Benefit Integrity Project

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *145–47*, on the Benefit Integrity Project, what estimates his Department made of the level of successful reviews and appeals following decisions made by the Benefit Integrity Project, when calculating estimated benefit savings; and what plans his Department has to revise the current estimate for benefit savings to reflect the latest statistics on appeals against decisions made under the Benefit Integrity Project. [66413]

Mr. Bayley: The most recent estimate of benefit savings from the Benefit Integrity Project is £8 million for 1997–98, £30 million for 1998–99 and £35 million for 1999–2000. A further estimate of the savings attributable to this Project will be calculated when it ceases.

Notes:

1. The estimate is based on information on reviews and appeals to the middle of 1998. This showed awards were increased in 32 per cent. of review decisions and 73 per cent. of appeal decisions. Cases processed as part of the Benefit Integrity Project after this date were assumed to follow a similar pattern in terms of review and appeal decisions.

2. This estimate was made on the assumption that the Project would continue to March 2000.

Disability Benefits

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if recipients of Severe Disablement Allowance will be compelled to attend work-focused job interviews through the Single Gateway to Work. [66245]

Angela Eagle: Through the Single Work-Focused Gateway we want to offer help to the widest range of people possible—no one should be denied the offer of help and assistance.

Attendance at a Personal Adviser interview will be a condition of receiving benefits for claimants of working age who are out of work including those claiming Severe Disablement Allowance. However, this requirement may be waived or deferred in appropriate cases.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the responses to the consultation document on disability benefits. [66708]

Mr. Bayley: Consultation on our proposals for the reform of benefits for disabled people ended on 8 January and 342 responses have been received. Just over half came from organisations representing disabled people, at both national and local level, from local authorities, and from the insurance industry. Most of the remaining responses came from individuals. Nearly 50 hon. Members submitted responses, many from their constituents. The All Party Disablement Group also submitted a response. We thank hon. Members and all those who took the time and trouble to respond to the consultation document and can assure them that we are studying the responses carefully.

A list of the organisations who responded has been placed in the Library. Copies of the list and copies of specific responses are available, excluding those that requested confidentiality, on request from the Disability Benefits Consultation Team, Department of Social Security, 6th Floor, The Adelphi, 1–11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66217]

Mr. Timms: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer from my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Disabled People (Employment Services)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the services that will be available to a disabled person attending an interview through the Single Work-focused Gateway announced on 13 January; and how these differ from those under the Single Gateway to Work announced in "A New Contract for Welfare: The Gateway to Work" (Cm 4102). [66200]

Mr. Andrew Smith: For clients of working age accessing the benefit system, including people with disabilities, the work focused interview with a personal adviser will consist of an in-depth investigation of individual needs and an exploration of ways to overcome any barriers that prevent participation in the labour market. The adviser will access information on a wide range of options available locally, and provide a personalised calculation of potential in-work income. The aim will be to draw up and agree a tailor-made plan of steps which the individual can take.

The personal adviser will help people gain access to relevant services. Thus, for disabled people, it may be appropriate to seek the advice and support of a disability employment specialist or to get some kind of mentoring support.

The announcement on 13 January was that £79 million has been made available from the Invest to Save budget to finance the piloting of the Single Work Focused Gateway described in "A New Contract for Welfare: The Gateway to Work" (Cm 4102), which are thus one and the same.

New Deal (Hart)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the Hart district council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [65296]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is not possible to provide separate figures for individual towns or council areas.

The latest Government Statistical Service figures for the Guildford Unit of Delivery, which covers Hart, show that to the end of October 1998 (a) 461 young people had entered the Gateway and 126 have secured unsubsidised employment; (b) 69 had joined one of the four options: 14 on the Employment option; 9 on the Voluntary Sector option; 3 on the Environment Task Force; and 43 on the Full-Time Education and Training option. 150 young people were on the Gateway, 22 had left New Deal to claim other benefits, 19 had gone to other known destinations and 75 had gone to unknown destinations.

Jobcentres (Disabled Access)

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many job centres are fully accessible for the disabled; and what percentage have the equipment and trained staff to offer a gateway interview to disabled people. [65086]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service Agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Geraint Davies, dated 19 January 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to reply direct to your question regarding the number of Jobcentres that are fully accessible for the disabled; and what percentage have the equipment and trained staff to offer a gateway interview to disabled people. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

It may be helpful if I explain that for the last three years the Employment Service has carried out an annual audit of progress on its planned programme of works to improve the accessibility of Jobcentres to people with disabilities. This is to ensure that we comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act within the timescales set. The audit indicates whether our buildings have wheelchair access, loop hearing aid facilities and disabled toilets.

The latest audit results showed that from a total of 1180 premises, 93% have wheelchair access for clients. The remaining offices offer alternative arrangements to clients with special needs—either arranging interviews at a nearby office with disabled access or by visiting the clients in their homes.

In addition, 64% of Jobcentres have toilet facilities for disabled people and 72% have loop hearing facilities. We expect these proportions to increase to 66 and 90% respectively by April 1999 as part of our planned improvement programme.

With regard to the percentage of offices which have staff trained to offer New Deal gateway interviews to disabled people, I can confirm that we are normally able to provide such a service in all of our offices.

I hope this is helpful.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Children (Parental Contact)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department for what reasons the courts and other authorities are not able to take action when one parent takes unilateral action in preventing the other parent from having contact with their child. [65880]

Mr. Hoon: Contact arrangements normally work best when both parents are willing to co-operate, and in approaching the enforcement of contact orders the courts will seek to secure this. But the courts can, and will, enforce orders granting a parent contact with a child, including imprisonment as a last resort. Courts take their decisions in the best interests of the child and in the light of all the evidence and the particular circumstances of each case.

Decennial Census Records

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what powers he has to reduce the closure period of official decennial census records; what representations he has received requesting the reduction of the closure period of official decennial census records; and if he will instruct the Public Record Office to reduce the closure period of official decennial census records to 75 years. [65913]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor has powers under section 5(1) of the Public Records Act 1958 to reduce the closure period of official records with the approval, or at the request, of the Minister primarily concerned.

The Lord Chancellor has received a number of representations from family historians requesting a reduction in the closure period of official decennial census records.

The Lord Chancellor does not intend to change the existing closure period, which corresponds to the guidelines established in the White Paper *Open Government* of 1993 (Cm 2290). This assigned a 100-year closure period for decennial census returns on the grounds that they consisted of documents supplied in confidence the disclosure of which would constitute a breach of good faith.

The intention of the Minister primarily concerned with the decennial census returns, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, was expressed in a written answer to Lord Teviot on 14 October 1997, *Official Report, House of Lords*, columns *138–39*.

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Servants (Hearing Impairment)

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what estimate his Department has made of the total cost of introducing retrospective changes to the superannuation scheme for civil servants so as to ensure that former and current civil servants are granted pension entitlements for the years they were designated as having permanent unestablished status solely on the basis of a hearing impairment. [65268]

Mr. Kilfoyle: No estimate has been made of these costs (or of extending any concession to the large numbers of civil servants who in other circumstances did not qualify for a pension). I am afraid that I can hold out no hope of any relevant improvement in the statutory provisions. In superannuation matters, it is rarely, if ever, possible to make changes with retrospective effect.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what estimate his Department has made of the total number of civil servants who have not yet reached retirement age who have at some point in their career been given permanent unestablished status solely on the grounds of a hearing impediment. [65267]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The distinction between established and unestablished service disappeared in 1972 when a new pension scheme was introduced. Staff serving in an unestablished capacity, including those on permanent unestablished terms, were admitted to the scheme. Their earlier unestablished service then became pensionable. There are no centrally held records of the numbers of staff serving in a permanent unestablished capacity who resigned before this change was made and who subsequently returned to the Civil Service.

The Stationery Office

Mr. Amess: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what controls are used to assess *(a)* competitiveness and *(b)* relative costs, and what measures he takes to limit those costs when purchasing printed matter from The Stationery Office. [66093]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Cabinet Office seeks to achieve best value for money from all of its purchasing activities whether it is buying printed matter or other goods and services.

Cabinet Office Print Procurement arrangements are currently handled via the Central Office of Information which places work with suppliers who have been appointed after competition and in accordance with EC Public Procurement regulations. The Stationery Office Ltd. is just one of those suppliers and is only used when it is able to provide the most cost-effective solution.

In addition, the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, acting in her capacity as Queen's Printer, has a number of Print and Publishing contracts with The Stationery Office Ltd. These cover the "Civil Service Year Book", Acts of Parliament, Measures of the Synod of the Church of England, Statutory Instruments, Statutory Rules of Northern Ireland, Command Papers, and the *London, Belfast* and *Edinburgh Gazettes*. The contracts, which were let on 30 September 1996 as part of the privatisation exercise undertaken by the last Administration, expire on various dates between 30 September 2000 and 30 September 2001. The process of re-tendering under EC Public Procurement procedures will commence in April 1999.

If The Stationery Office Ltd. decides to bid for any Cabinet Office contract it is treated no differently from any other company submitting tenders for the work.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66205]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*.

SCOTLAND

National Lottery (Staffing)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many staff are employed by the Scottish Office, the Scottish Sports Council, the Scottish Arts Council and other public bodies in connection with administration of the National Lottery; and what are the annual costs involved in administering and allocating grants within Scotland under the various National Lottery schemes. [63855]

Mr. Galbraith: *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The number of staff employed and the annual costs involved in connection with the administration of the National Lottery are as follows:

	Number of staff	*£*
The Scottish Office	[1]1.5	50,000
Scottish Arts Council	[1]35	[2]1,908,000
Scottish Sports Council	[1]35	[2]1,206,647

[1] Staff numbers are full time equivalent. The numbers of staff involved in Lottery issues fluctuate throughout the year.
[2] Figures relate to 1997–98.

The Millennium Commission, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the National Lottery Charities Board also distribute Lottery funds in Scotland. These bodies operate on a UK-wide basis. It is not possible to estimate precisely the numbers of staff or administration costs associated with their work in Scotland.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prison Service (Race Relations)

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the report of the Prison Service Race Relations Group. [66707]

Mr. George Howarth: A copy of the eighth report of the Prison Service Race Relations Group to the Prisons Board has been placed in the Library.

Young Offenders Institution

Mr. Thorn Cross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many hours a week are spent by prisoners at Thorn Cross Young Offenders Institution, Cheshire, on education, community work, preparation for employment and work to change offending behaviour; and how this compares with time spent on similar activities at other young offenders institutions. [66248]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service does not record separately the time spent on all of the activities listed.

For the financial year 1998–99 to the end of December, the average weekly time spent in education by prisoners at Thorn Cross was 13.2 hours. This compares with an average across all young offender institutions of 5.9 hours.

This includes daytime education, vocational training courses, construction and industrial training courses and evening education classes.

The average weekly time spent on total purposeful activities at Thorn Cross for the same period was 49.3 hours. The average for all young offender institutions was 22.0 hours.

Total purposeful activity includes education, training, employment in prisoner enterprise service workshops, employment in prison farms, gardens, kitchens and messes, cleaning and domestic work in the prison, resettlement and rehabilitation activity and physical education.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average cost for each place on the high-intensity training pilot scheme at Thorn Cross Young Offenders Institution, Cheshire. [66250]

Mr. George Howarth: £22,700 per year.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average weekly cost of keeping a prisoner at a young offenders' institution. [66244]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts, copies of which are in the Library, provide information on the average annual cost per place by establishment type, however, this includes establishment costs only and excludes Prison Service headquarters overheads. The average annual net operating cost per place in a young offender institution for 1997–98 was £18,400.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what basis prisoners are selected for a place on the high-intensity training pilot scheme at Thorn Cross Young Offenders Institution, Cheshire. [66249]

Mr. George Howarth: Young offenders are considered on the basis of applications made by the young offender himself or on the recommendation of his probation officer, personal officer, court or family. Applicants must be category D prisoners suitable for open conditions. Those serving sentences for sexual offences, offences against children or offences involving serious violence are not eligible. Applicants must have a sufficient period of their sentence remaining to enable them to complete the course before release. Those applicants who meet these criteria are interviewed and assessed by a team of staff from Thorn Cross, which includes a psychologist, to identify those with the greatest potential to benefit from the high-intensity training scheme.

Cellphone Jammers

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the letter of 20 September to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what he has done to keep under review the possible use of cellphone jammers to disrupt criminal activity. [65396]

Mr. Boateng: The Home Office is looking at these devices to determine their suitability for police use.

Visa Applications

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the *(a)* target time and *(b)* average actual time between applications for renewal of visas and decisions for nationals of (i) Bahrain and (ii) China currently in the United Kingdom. [65755]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: 2,280 applications for further leave to remain by nationals of Bahrain and of China were decided in the public enquiry offices on the day of application in 1998; and 1,260 postal applications were decided within 16–17 weeks in respect of both nationalities. We aim to decide all applications in the shortest possible time.

State of Emergency Regulations

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which department of Government have responsibility for keeping the UK State of Emergency regulations under review; when the last review was made; if he will undertake his own departmental review of the regulations; and if this matter has been included in the general review of international obligations announced on 3 July 1997. [65999]

Mr. George Howarth: The Home Office has overall responsibility for any emergency regulations that might be made under the powers contained in the Emergency Powers Act 1920. However, as the Act covers a wide range of subjects, a number of other Departments might also be involved if regulations were needed.

A review of the potential requirements was carried out in 1995. A fresh review involving departments generally, which includes considering Millennium related issues, is in progress. Until a situation requiring the use of emergency powers arose, any link with international obligations would be hypothetical.

Diarmuid O'Neill

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date findings of the police investigation into the shooting on 23 September 1996 of Diarmuid O'Neill were received by *(a)* the Police Complaints Authority, *(b)* the Crown Prosecution Service and *(c)* Her Majesty's Coroner; and what decisions have been made by each of these bodies concerning criminal or disciplinary action. [66085]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that the police investigation report was sent to the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) on 2 November, and to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and Her Majesty's Coroner on 20 November.

As at 18 January, no decisions had been taken in relation to criminal action by the CPS, or to disciplinary action by the PCA, with the Metropolitan Police. Her Majesty's Coroner has no role in relation to such action.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each other European Union country, how many asylum seekers have been accepted in each of the last two years. [66112]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The most recent available information, for 1995 and 1996, is given in the table. This was taken from the report of the Secretariat of the Inter-Governmental Consultation on Asylum, Refugee and Migration Policies in Europe, North America and Australia, entitled "Report on Asylum Procedures— September 1997". No figures were published for Austria, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg or Portugal.

Cases recognised as refugees and granted asylum in countries in the European Union, 1995 and 1996

Country	*1995*	*1996*
Belgium	604	313
Denmark	4,810	1,214
Finland	4	11
France	4,742	4,344
Germany	23,468	24,000
Italy	287	157
Netherlands	7,980	8,806
Spain	464	n/a
Sweden	8,460	130

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers have been allowed into the United Kingdom in the last two years; and from which countries they came. [66115]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is given in the table.

Table 1: Applications[1] for asylum, received in the UK, excluding dependants, by nationality and location where made, 1997 and January to November 1998

	Number of principal applicants (Total)
Europe	
Bulgaria	700
Cyprus	580
Poland	1,880
Romania	1,450
Former USSR	4,535
Turkey	3,215
Former Yugoslavia	9,430
Others	3,175
Total	24,970
Americas	
Colombia	1,725
Others	2,005
Total	3,735
Middle East	
Iran	1,260
Iraq	2,235
Lebanon	300
Others	1,055
Total	4,850
Africa	
Algeria	1,855
Angola	330
Cameroon	255
Democratic Republic of Congo	1,265
Ethiopia	460
Gambia	170
Ghana	555
Ivory Coast	155
Kenya	1,430
Liberia	275
Nigeria	2,755
Rwanda	335
Sierra Leone	1,340
Somalia	6,680
South Africa	100
Sudan	460
Tanzania	165
Togo	85
Uganda	405
Zimbabwe	135
Others	1,225
Total	20,445
Asia	
Afghanistan	3,155
Bangladesh	985
China	3,755
India	2,250
Pakistan	3,440
Sri Lanka	5,060
Others	830
Total	19,480
Other and unknown nationalities	270
Grand Total	73,745

[1] Figures rounded to nearest 5

London Fire Brigade

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure that the London Fire Brigade can meet any additional fire risk associated with the Millennium Dome. [66090]

Mr. George Howarth: The statutory responsibility for ensuring efficient fire services rests with the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority.

Data Protection

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list each derogation from Article 8 of the Data Protection Directive 95/46/EC which he plans to provide to the Commission, pursuant to Article 8(6) of that Directive; and if he will make a statement. [65981]

Mr. George Howarth: I am not yet in a position to provide a full list. The derogations will include processing covered by paragraphs 7 and 9 of Schedule 3 of the Data Protection Act 1998, and by any order made under paragraph 10 of that Schedule. Such an order is likely to include the processing of information about criminal offences and criminal convictions for the purpose of preventing or detecting criminal offences; the processing by political parties of information about political opinions in connection with canvassing; and certain processing by the police or other investigating organisations. I am considering further suggestions made in the responses to last August's consultation exercise on subordinate legislation under the Data Protection Act 1998.

Electoral Register

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the uses made of the Electoral Register for non-electoral purposes and *(b)* those bodies which have indicated to his review of the use of the Electoral Register for non-electoral purposes that they access the Register; and if he will make a statement. [65967]

Mr. George Howarth: The Home Office Working Party is continuing to examine the case for a change in the way in which the electoral register is made available for non-electoral purposes. The main uses so far identified include credit referencing, direct marketing, and the prevention of fraud and money laundering. There is also some use made by charities for fundraising, and by genealogists for research purposes.

Most of the organisations which have responded do not purchase copies of the register directly: those indicating that they use data at least partially based on the register, but excluding local authorities and other Government Departments, were:

Abbey National
Advertising Association
Age Concern
Alliance and Leicester
American Express
Association of British Insurers
Bank of Ireland
Bank of Scotland
Blue Cross
Britannia Building Society
British Bankers' Association
British Retail Consortium
Brooks and Bentley Ltd.
CACI Ltd.
Cadogan Estates Ltd.
CBI
Celebration File
Charity Commission
Communicator
Computing Group Ltd.
Consumer Credit Trade Association
Council of Mortgage Lenders
Credit Card Research Group
Credit Services Association
Direct Marketing Association
Direct Select
Equifax
EuroDirect
Evand Hunt Scott Ltd.
Experian
Finance and Leasing Association
Foxtons Ltd.
GB Information Management
George Walker and Co.
Grattans PLC
HFC Bank
Hopewiser Ltd.
Imperial Cancer Research Fund
Institute of Credit Management
Institute of Sales Promotion
Integral Marketing Ltd.
IPA
JICPOPS
Lewis Group Ltd.
Library Association
List Experts Ltd.
Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society
Lowe Direct Ltd.
Mailbird Organisation
Mail Order Traders' Association
Market Research Society
MBNA International Bank
National Consumer Credit Federation
National Geographic Society
Newspaper Society
NSPCC
Oxfam
Periodical Publishers Association
Post Office
QVC the Shopping Channel
Reader's Digest
Registry Trust Ltd.
Response Marketing Ltd.
Rothmans (UK) Ltd.
Sainsbury's Bank
Sears Financial Services Ltd.
Small Business Bureau
TBDA Ltd.
Telegraph Group Ltd.
Valldata Services Ltd.
Waddies Print Group
WWAV Rapp Collins.

Police Records

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the practice of enforced subject access to police records for purposes which are not related to employment; and if he will make a statement. [65964]

Mr. Boateng: It is difficult to know, in any particular case, whether a subject access application has been "enforced" but in the opinion of the police, the majority

of enforced subject access applications are made for employment purposes. We have not undertaken any further research into this practice.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of Slovenia are currently being detained in the UK as illegal immigrants; and what were the equivalent figures for each of the last three years. [65736]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write to the hon. Member.

Greyhound Races

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will legislate to ensure that all greyhound tracks are required to subscribe to a national registration scheme. [65877]

Mr. George Howarth: We have no plans for such legislation.

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will implement a betting levy on greyhound races to be used in establishing a national monitoring authority to supervise races in respect of animal welfare issues. [65876]

Mr. George Howarth: We have no plans to legislate for a levy on greyhound betting.

Overseas Electors

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many British citizens entitled to vote in British elections currently live overseas. [66098]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of British citizens included as overseas electors in the current register published in February 1998 was 17,315. The Office for National Statistics will publish figures for the new register, which comes into force on 16 February 1999, by the end of April.

Drink Driving

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list by each police authority area how many breathalysed drivers were deemed to have exceeded the legal limit between Christmas and the New Year in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [65873]

Mr. Boateng: Figures collected by the Home Office do not enable the Christmas and New Year period to be separately identified. The Association of Chief Police Officers, however, has collected figures on the number of positives tests of drivers who had been involved in collisions dealt with by the police during the Christmas Drink Drive campaign for the last two years, and these are in Table 1. Comparable figures for 1996–97 are not available.

The Home Office does, however, collect and publish figures for the month of December, and they are given on Table 2. Figures for 1998 are not yet available, but will be published in the spring.

Table 1: Drivers involved in collisions during the Christmas drink drive campaign period who gave a positive breath test (or who refused a test) in England and Wales

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Avon and Somerset	30	35
Bedfordshire	13	3
Cambridgeshire	17	12
Cheshire	30	19
Cleveland	4	9
Cumbria	11	7
Derbyshire	17	15
Devon and Cornwall	43	49
Dorset	8	8
Durham	15	9
Essex	20	27
Gloucestershire	15	7
Greater Manchester	63	50
Hampshire	66	55
Hertfordshire	20	10
Humberside	37	24
Kent	33	38
Lancashire	34	31
Leicestershire	12	19
Lincolnshire	16	10
London, City of	—	2
Merseyside	23	14
Metropolitan Police	247	161
Norfolk	16	12
Northamptonshire	12	14
Northumbria	47	12
North Yorkshire	16	17
Nottinghamshire	23	26
South Yorkshire	25	11
Staffordshire	20	15
Suffolk	11	10
Surrey	21	24
Sussex	41	31
Thames Valley	60	49
Warwickshire	9	15
West Mercia	46	34
West Midlands	69	59
West Yorkshire	64	53
Wiltshire	27	20
Dyfed-Powys	16	10
Gwent	12	36
North Wales	43	6
South Wales	28	13
Total	1,380	1,081

Source:
Association of Chief Police Officers

Table 2: Total number of positive/refused breath tests in England and Wales during December

	1996	*1997*
Avon and Somerset	270	280
Bedfordshire	80	120
Cambridgeshire	110	130
Cheshire	200	120
Cleveland	90	80

Table 2: Total number of positive/refused breath tests in England and Wales during December

	1996	*1997*
Cumbria	80	80
Derbyshire	180	160
Devon and Cornwall	200	100
Dorset	100	130
Durham	100	110
Essex	260	310
Gloucestershire	130	120
Greater Manchester	580	630
Hampshire	340	310
Hertfordshire	110	120
Humberside	100	110
Kent	150	140
Lancashire	320	230
Leicestershire	180	170
Lincolnshire	90	90
London, City of	50	50
Merseyside	220	190
Metropolitan Police	1,720	1,440
Norfolk	90	110
Northamptonshire	90	120
Northumbria	310	310
North Yorkshire	170	170
Nottinghamshire	240	220
South Yorkshire	210	200
Staffordshire	170	170
Suffolk	120	100
Surrey	130	120
Sussex	240	170
Thames Valley	570	450
Warwickshire	120	110
West Mercia	200	140
West Midlands	330	340
West Yorkshire	320	470
Wiltshire	110	110
Dyfed-Powys	80	70
Gwent	130	110
North Wales	140	120
South Wales	230	340
Total	9,640	9,140

Source:

Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate

Probation Officer Statistics

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many probation officers are currently in training; [65764]

(2) what assessment he has made of the prospects for a national shortage of qualified probation officers based on current projections of annual turnover, natural wastage and numbers in training; [65786]

(3) how many probation officers were in training in each year from 1990 to the latest year for which figures are available. [65765]

Mr. George Howarth: There are at present 274 trainee probation officers. A work force planning study is currently being undertaken, and this will provide national data on the number of new probation officers needed over the next five years.

Under the previous training scheme for probation officers, the Home Office sponsored students on Diploma in Social Work courses. The numbers of students starting sponsored courses from 1990 to 1995 was:

1990: 336

1991: 434

1992: 451

1993: 470

1994: 305

1995: 300.

The scheme ended with the 1995 students. It should, however, be noted that research indicated that only about 60 per cent. of those sponsored went on to become probation officers.

Firearms (Compensation)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many compensation claims have been made to each police force in England for firearms reloading presses indicating the number *(a)* approved and *(b)* paid; [65775]

(2) how many claims for compensation have been received to date for *(a)* Lee Progressive and *(b)* RCBS Firearms reloading presses; and how many have been (i) approved and (ii) paid. [65776]

Mr. Boateng: Payments have been made in respect of 578 reloading presses surrendered under Option B of the compensation scheme to police forces in England. Lee and RCBS presses are not included within this total as these types of press must be claimed under Option C of the compensation scheme. I regret to say that information is not at present available on the numbers and types of press surrendered and paid under this Option.

Millennium (Policing)

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the extra costs to police forces in England and Wales of policing millennium celebrations; and what plans he has to provide additional resources to meet those costs. [65883]

Mr. Boateng: The police service have estimated that the costs of policing millennium celebrations across England and Wales on 31 December 1999 could be around £12 million out of total available expenditure of over £7 billion.

The Government's spending plans for the police announced last July, and re-stated in a reply my right hon. Friend gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *194–97*, will allow Total Standard Spending on the police in England and Wales to increase by £186 million next year, a 2.7 per cent. increase over 1998–99. Police authorities will be able to increase their spending power by achieving the 2 per cent. efficiency target which has been set and re-investing the savings in front-line policing. There is also some scope for increased

spending from council tax. However, the Government expect police authorities to set budgets that are responsible, prudent and reasonable and which do not impose an excessive increase in council tax.

Dr. Bavo Omoviola

Sir Alastair Goodlad: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about the proposed deportation of Dr. Bavo Omoviola (H.O. Ref 0138995); and if he will make a statement. [66327]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Home Secretary and I have received a number of representations both from Members of this House, friends and supporters of Dr. Omoviola, and representatives of his local community. Full and careful consideration is being given to these representations.

Crime Reduction (Flintshire)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been made available for the crime reduction programme in Flintshire; and if he will make a statement. [66421]

Mr. Boateng: Under the crime reduction programme, £250 million is available over the next three years for England and Wales for projects which offer a significant and sustained impact on crime. We will be announcing in due course the allocation of funding as each of the programme's initiatives is launched.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been made available for the Targeted Policing Scheme in Flintshire; and if he will make a statement. [66422]

Mr. Boateng: £32 million is available over the next three years for the development of targeted policing in England and Wales as part of the crime reduction programme. The closing date for police forces to apply to be one of the first 10 projects, due to start from April, is 29 January and, as a result, no decisions have yet been taken on the location of the projects.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cumulative cost to his Department of ministerial use of RAF flights in the year to 1 May 1997. [64739]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* As my answer of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *214*, made clear, Ministers are required under the terms of the Ministerial Code always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. The rules on travel for Ministers are the same as those that applied to the previous Administration. Travel by Ministers on Royal Air Force flights between the 16 month period between 2 May 1997 and 30 September 1998 is not directly comparable with the 12 months of the previous Administration.

The cumulative costs in the year to 1 May 1997 was £7,343.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Books (Funding)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on future funding for school books and library books in Northern Ireland. [65109]

Mr. McFall: The Block Grant allocations to Boards in total will enable the School Library Service to receive £2.8 million in 1999–2000, an increase of 2.6 per cent. In addition, specific provision of £0.5 million has also been made to enhance the school library book stock. The amount is expected to increase to £1 million in each of the following 2 years.

In addition £1.45 million is being allocated to support projects within the National Year of Reading and the School Improvement Programme to enhance literacy and numeracy skills.

Employment Statistics (Foyle)

Mr. Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many job losses there were in the constituency of Foyle in 1998. [65313]

Mr. Ingram: In 1998 there were 756 confirmed redundancies in the constituency of Foyle.

Mr. Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list for each ward in the constituency of Foyle the percentage of *(a)* people of working age in employment, *(b)* males of working age in employment, *(c)* females of working age in employment, *(d)* people unemployed, *(e)* males unemployed and *(f)* females unemployed, in (i) December 1997 and (ii) December 1998. [65347]

Mr. Ingram: The latest figures available for those of working age in employment in the Foyle Parliamentary Constituency relate to summer 1998. These are given in the table below, together with corresponding figures for summer 1997. Estimates at ward level are not available.

Percentage of working age in employment

	All persons	*Males*	*Females*
Summer 1988	58.5	67.6	50.0
Summer 1997	56.7	61.6	52.1

Source:
Labour Force Survey

The percentage of the work force unemployed is not available at ward level. However, the following table shows the numbers of male, female, and total claimant unemployed in each ward in the Foyle Parliamentary Constituency Area at December 1997 and December 1998.

Derry district council—unemployment

Ward	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
As at December 1997			
Altnagelvin	120	47	167
Ballynashallog	152	43	195
Banagher	101	23	124
Beechwood	147	20	167
Brandywell	178	30	208
Carn Hill	185	39	224

Derry district council—unemployment

Ward	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Caw	141	40	181
Claudy	104	15	119
Clondermot	103	15	118
Corrody	160	37	197
Creggan Central	185	33	218
Creggan South	133	24	157
Crevagh & Springtown	422	71	493
Culmore	198	49	247
Ebrington	111	27	138
Eglinton	126	30	156
Enagh	123	25	148
Faughan	85	20	105
Glen	181	32	213
Lisnagelvin	46	13	59
New Buildings	84	26	110
Pennyburn	118	46	164
Rosemount	176	44	220
St. Peter's	122	28	150
Shantallow East	158	23	181
Shantallow West	269	35	304
Strand	222	64	286
The Diamond	268	72	340
Victoria	136	32	168
Westland	186	36	222
Total	4,740	1,039	5,779
As at December 1998			
Altnagelvin	73	30	103
Ballynashallog	151	36	187
Banagher	97	13	110
Beechwood	130	23	153
Brandywell	148	24	172
Carn Hill	155	31	186
Caw	89	30	119
Claudy	111	18	129
Clondermot	125	25	150
Corrody	182	40	222
Creggan Central	160	31	191
Creggan South	122	22	144
Crevagh & Springtown	399	70	469
Culmore	182	50	232
Ebrington	64	11	75
Eglinton	136	35	171
Enagh	77	20	97
Faughan	101	35	136
Glen	194	51	245
Lisnagelvin	31	6	37
New Buildings	97	35	132
Pennyburn	102	40	142
Rosemount	178	51	229
St. Peter's	131	21	152
Shantallow East	143	29	172
Shantallow West	228	37	265
Strand	222	70	292
The Diamond	280	58	338
Victoria	139	23	162
Westland	168	30	198
Total	4,415	995	5,410

Mr. Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the average income for people in employment in the constituency of Foyle *(a)* in the constituency as a whole, *(b)* per ward, *(c)* per ward for males and *(d)* per ward for females in the most recent year for which figures are available. [65315]

Mr. Ingram: Estimates of total income (including income from sources other than salaries and wages) are not available at Parliamentary Constituency level. In 1998, the average gross weekly earnings of full-time adult employees in the constituency of Foyle was £339.8. The average for males was £381.9 and the average for females £281.3. Similar information at ward level is not available.

Higher Education

Mr. Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many full-time higher education places are available to students in the Northern Ireland Western Education and Library Board area. [65308]

Mr. McFall: There were 2,864 students enrolled on full-time higher education courses at institutions located in the Western Education and Library Board area in 1997–98. Enrolment figures for 1998–99 are not yet available.

Student Nurses

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at which locations student nurse training places are provided; how many of the places at each location have been filled by applicants; if there is a shortage of nurses in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement. [65291]

Mr. McFall: Pre-registration student nurse training is commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Services through a contract arrangement with Queen's university of Belfast. For 1998–99 the number of pre-registration places included in the contract were 425, of which 419 were taken up by applicants.

I am satisfied that we do not face the same nursing recruitment and retention difficulties as there may be in other parts of the United Kingdom. There is no immediate concern about a shortage of nurses available to meet the requirements of the HPSS in Northern Ireland. However, I have asked my Department to monitor the situation.

Schools (Preparatory Departments)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at which schools there are facilities for preparatory departments; and how many pupils are enrolled in each of these preparatory departments. [65484]

Mr. McFall: Schools with preparatory departments and their enrolments are as follows:

School name	*Enrolment* [1]
Ballymena Academy	94
Bangor Grammar School	115
Belfast Royal Academy	235
Bloomfield Collegiate	79
Campbell College	159
Balriada School	125
Down High School	105
Foyle and Londonderry College	50
Friends School	187
Glenlola Collegiate	94
Hunterhouse College	88
Larne Grammar School	36
Lurgan College	35
Methodist College	534
Portadown College	37
Raincy Endowed School	29
Regent House School	160
Royal Belfast Academical Institution	238
Royal School Armagh	49

School name	Enrolment [1]
Royal School Dungannon	22
Stratheam School	151
Sullivan Upper School	190
Victoria College	157
Wallace High School	198

[1] Figures exclude nursery and reception pupils

Electricity

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many complaints she received about Northern Ireland Electricity services during December 1998; what proposals she has to nationalise the electricity distribution systems in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement. [65485]

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State received some 30 complaints and inquiries about the disruption to power supplies caused by the storms in late December. In addition, the independent Director General of Electricity Supply for Northern Ireland, who has the statutory duty to protect the interests of consumers in respect of continuity of supply and quality of supply services provided, has received some 1,050 complaints and inquiries. The Director has sought a full and detailed report from NIE by 31 January 1999 on the company's response to the problems encountered by consumers over the Christmas holiday period. The Secretary of State met NIE on 6 January and expressed her concern about the difficulties faced by consumers. NIE agreed to provide the Secretary of State with a copy of the report being prepared for the Director. The Government have no plans to nationalise the electricity distribution system in Northern Ireland.

Natural Gas

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the estimated populations of the boroughs of *(a)* Ards, *(b)* Castlereagh and *(c)* North Down; what proposals there are to provide a natural gas supply in these three boroughs; and if she will make a statement. [65482]

Mr. Ingram: According to figures produced at the 1991 Population Census the population of these Boroughs is as follows:

	Male	Female	Total
Ards	31,527	33,237	64,764
Castlereagh	28,946	31,853	60,799
North Down	34,284	37,548	71,832

Under the terms of the Development Plan contained in the combined licences for the conveyance and supply of gas to the Greater Belfast area, issued to Phoenix Natural Gas Ltd. on 5 September 1996, the company is required to provide gas to these Boroughs as follows:

Ards by the end of the year 2006

Castlereagh by the end of the year 2005

North Down by the end of the year 2003.

Grammar Schools (Boarders)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at which grammar schools there are facilities for boarders; and how many boarders there are at each of these schools. [65483]

Mr. McFall: There are facilities for boarders at 9 grammar schools in Northern Ireland and the number of pupils who board are as follows:

School	No. of boarders as at 1 January 1999
Campbell College, Belfast	46
Friend's School, Lisburn	35
Hunterhouse College, Belfast	54
Methodist College, Belfast	137
The Royal School, Armagh	64
The Royal School, Dungannon	31
St. Colman's College, Newry	47
St. Patrick's Grammar, Armagh	41
Victoria College, Belfast	36

Policing Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she received the report of the June 1998 police investigation into the circumstances of departmental leaks concerning her telephone conversations about appointments to the Policing Commission; and if she will list *(a)* the principal conclusions of the report and *(b)* her responses to each recommendation. [66086]

Marjorie Mowlam: An internal Government investigation into the matter is ongoing. A separate rigorous review of document handling and distribution within the Department has been completed and its recommendations are being considered.

Equality Working Group

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she expects to receive the report of the equality working group chaired by Dr. Joan Stringer; and if she will make a statement. [65993]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Equality Commission Working Group has had four meetings and intend to consult interested parties before finalising its recommendations. They anticipate reporting to me in early March. However, the Secretary of State expects to receive an interim report shortly recommending a structure for the Board, following which the Secretary of State hopes to advertise Commissioner posts.

Wrongful Convictions (Compensation)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to her answer of 10 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *270*, on compensation for wrongful conviction, how many persons have had their convictions quashed by the Court of Appeal in each of the last 10 years. [65994]

Mr. Ingram: The numbers of persons whose convictions have been quashed by the Court of Appeal for Northern Ireland during the last 10 years are, by year:

Year	*Number of persons*
1992	3
1994	1
1997	1
1998	1

One person had a separate conviction quashed by the Court of Appeal for England and Wales, has made an application for compensation to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in respect of the quashing of both convictions. In the case of another person, the court quashed his conviction but ordered a retrial.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Country Strategies

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list those country strategies which have been prepared in consultation with ambassadors for British business; and if those consultees have business interests in the country assessed. [66343]

Clare Short: We have, so far, published fifteen country strategy papers (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, China, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Peru, Poland, Russia, South Africa, Ukraine, Vietnam). In developing these country strategies, we have consulted widely including the business community, both in-country and in the UK. Our approach has been to work with established business groups, rather than with individual companies. In developing countries we have consulted with British business associations and local chambers of commerce. In the UK, we have worked with the DTI Area Advisory Groups for specific countries as well as with business groups with a regional or country interest.

Overseas Students

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many students from sub-Saharan Africa were in receipt of her Department's awards to study in Britain in *(a)* 1989–90 and *(b)* the latest year for which figures are available; what was the percentage change in awards; and if she will make a statement. [66198]

Clare Short: The number of students from sub-Saharan Africa who were in receipt of my Department's awards to study in Britain in 1989–90 and 1997–98 are as follows:

1989–90: 7,671

1997–98: 1,585.

The percentage change in awards is—79 per cent.

This reflects the positive commitment shift from UK-based training to "in-country" and regional training and workshops over the past ten years.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her Department's awards to students from sub-Saharan Africa for study in Britain are managed by the British Council. [66219]

Clare Short: All the Department for International Development's awards for training in Britain for students from sub-Saharan Africa are managed by the British Council.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will increase the number of her Department's awards to students from sub-Saharan Africa to study in Britain. [66220]

Clare Short: The provision of awards for study in Britain is determined by the priorities identified in our Country Strategy Papers, in line with my Department's White Paper on poverty elimination. We shall continue to address the needs of Sub-Saharan Africa for skills development by ensuring that training awards and centrally funded scholarship schemes are targeted on those countries which need them most.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what factors underlie her Department's policy for making awards to sub-Saharan Africans to study in Britain; and what assessment she has made of the benefits to *(a)* the students and *(b)* Britain. [66224]

Clare Short: The provision of awards for study in Britain is intended to support the development goals and priorities outlined in the White Paper. For Sub-Saharan Africa the need is to build up skills which will contribute to their countries' social and economic development, including scientific and technological development.

Scholarship schemes are reviewed periodically by my Department; the latest review was carried out by Sir William Taylor in August 1997. A number of benefits were identified.

The benefits of interest to DFID are the enhancement of skills and capacity to promote the development of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is the proper objective of all spending of DFID's development assistance.

British Council

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on British Council work, funded by her Department, to support civil society, human rights and democracy in East and West Africa. [66199]

Clare Short: The British Council manage, under contract to the Department for International Development (DFID), a number of projects in East and West Africa which involve support for civil society, human rights and democracy. In East Africa these include a £1.4 million civil society programme in Kenya which funds a range of democratisation and human rights initiatives, a project to strengthen the capacity of the Ugandan National Electoral Commission and programmes to empower women in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The focus in West Africa is Nigeria. There, the British Council manages a fund for small scale good government initiatives to strengthen accountability and transparency, human rights, democracy and training in conflict management. The annual budget was increased to £500,000 for this financial year, in particular to help with the transition to democratic rule now under way.

In addition, good government is an operational area for the British Council's grant in aid funding in East and West Africa, part of whose costs have been met by my Department.

Palestinian Authority (EU Funds)

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the use of funds donated to the Palestinian Authority by the European Union. [64594]

Mr. Foulkes: The European Union, including individual Member States, has made a major contribution to supporting the Middle East Peace Process by providing 54 per cent. ($1.7 billion) of total development assistance to the Palestinians since 1993. This includes over 650 mecu provided directly by the European Commission to the Palestine Authority. My Department maintains good links with EC officials in Brussels and the West Bank and Gaza, and participates in the Maghreb/Mashreq Working Group at which aid policy towards EC projects for the Palestine Authority is discussed. To enable Member States to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of EC aid we pressed for an evaluation of the EC's recently expired five-year programme of assistance for the Palestinians. We understand that this evaluation is soon to be finalised, and expect to receive the findings shortly.

Misappropriated Aid

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 11 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *23*, if she will list *(a)* the countries and *(b)* the projects in respect of which overseas expenditure was misappropriated through corruption or fraud in 1996–97 and 1997–98; what prosecutions have taken place in respect of these amounts, and with what outcome; and if any of the money has been recovered. [66595]

Clare Short: In each of the following projects the amount shown was not properly accounted for and we have concluded that this was, or may have been, due to fraud. To date no prosecutions have been mounted and none of the money has been recovered although some locally engaged staff have been dismissed in two of these cases. Investigations are still proceeding into each of the 1997–98 cases. I cannot of course give details of these ongoing cases which could prejudice any proceedings which might take place.

1996–97: Zambia: Health and Population Sector, £6,287. The loss from a locally operated imprest account was investigated thoroughly but there was insufficient evidence against any individual for a successful prosecution. Arrangements for financial management have since been tightened.

1997–98: (1) Bangladesh: Population and Health Consortium, £45,633; (2) Kenya: National Museums, £1,000. The figure for 1997–98 in my answer of 11 January 1999 included an estimated amount of £11,660 which has since been fully and properly accounted for.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her oral answer of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 954, on Zimbabwe, when the review of the Government's overall relationship with Zimbabwe was announced; what are the terms of reference of the review; what progress has been made; what plans she has to publish its conclusions; and if she will make a statement. [66488]

Clare Short: As I said in my letter of 14 January 1999, I am not quite sure how to make the position any clearer than I did in the House on 16 December. I had hoped that the hon. Lady would by now understand the process in which my Department is currently engaged.

Since this Government's creation of the Department for International Development and publication of the White Paper on International Development, we have been engaged in a process of consulting and reviewing our country strategies across the world, to bring them into line with the new principles, policies and objectives contained in the White Paper. As part of this process, we are reviewing our Zimbabwe strategy, as I mentioned in my answer to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on 16 December 1998. Some of the new strategies have already been published, and the new Zimbabwe strategy will be published in early 1999. This will help to make clear the differences between our approach and that of the previous Administration.

I have already explained to the House that our policy in Zimbabwe will be based on eliminating poverty, partly by promoting a transparent and poverty-focused approach to land reforms. We have also made this clear to the Government of Zimbabwe. We are not reviewing that policy: it has been clear since we formed our Government.

HEALTH

Mental Health Code of Practice

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if, in relation to paragraph 26.3 of the Mental Health Code of Practice for England, he will indicate *(a)* who takes the decisions on what would be in the child's best interest, *(b)* who the subsection is primarily aimed at and *(c)* for what reasons the subsection is drafted in wide terms. [65181]

Mr. Hutton: Paragraph 26.3 of the revised Mental Health Act Code of Practice, laid before Parliament on 3 December 1998, was included to ensure that visits by a child to a patient detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 are considered in relation to the child's best interests as well as the patient's, and that such decisions are recorded and monitored. The child should be treated as an individual with his or her own needs, and any decision to allow a child to visit a patient should be a positive one that it would be in their best interests.

Directions have already been issued to the three special hospitals regarding arrangements for visits by children. We intend to issue separate guidance as soon as possible to assist all other hospitals that take detained patients, and social services departments, in drawing up child visiting policies. This will be subject to prior consultation. Decisions on whether a child should visit will be the responsibility of the hospital managers, and hospital policies will set out the arrangements for deciding whether a child should visit a patient. Such arrangements will need to take account of the significant role that those

with parental responsibility have in allowing such visits. Written hospital policies will also set out those circumstances when parental consent alone will be sufficient to allow a child to visit a patient, and where this is not sufficient, who else should be involved in the decision-making process.

Recording of visits will allow hospital staff, with local social services departments, to monitor visits and regularly review the desirability of continuing visits by a child should the particular circumstances surrounding the patient, or the ward, change. The environment in which visits by children take place will be important when considering the child's best interests.

Paragraph 26.3 of the Code is drafted in wide terms to ensure that all visits by children are considered in this way. In the majority of cases, decisions will be straightforward, and will not affect current visiting practices. However, where hospitals or units care for mentally disordered offenders or those patients with more severe forms of mental illness policies on visiting will need to be more detailed and rigorously enforced.

Cancer Services

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on the implementation of the Calman/Hine report on the organisation and delivery of cancer services in the North London region; and if he will make a statement. [65063]

Mr. Hutton: In that part of the London Region which was formerly within the North Thames Region, the majority of health authorities have focused initially on breast cancer services and have agreed standards of care for their cancer units based on the guidance "Improving Outcomes in Breast Cancer" published in July 1996. Progress has also been made on the designation of those units that will provide services for colorectal, lung and gynaecological cancers. Work is planned within the new London Region to harmonise the standards and processes adopted by the different health authorities and to jointly agree future milestones for the designation process. Also provisionally designated centres are continuing to develop protocols of care for each cancer.

The network of care and centre unit links in London are complex, particularly north of the Thames. Further work will be carried out jointly by the new London Regional Office, health authorities, centres and units to clarify these networks, and to ensure that the protocols of care and centre unit links are developed properly.

Paediatric Physiotherapy

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps the Government have taken to ensure that children receive paediatric physiotherapy in line with their statements. [65499]

Mr. Hutton: Following the consultation on the Green Paper "Excellence for All Children", my right hon. Friends, the Secretaries of State for Health and Education and Employment set up a joint working group to consider how to improve arrangements for providing speech and language therapy to children with special educational needs. This will include discussion of other therapies, including physiotherapy, which may form part of a statement of special educational needs.

Electroconvulsive Therapy

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people received ECT *(a)* with and *(b)* without consent in each of the last five years. [65908]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally. The Department is undertaking a one-off survey on electroconvulsive therapy to cover activities in mental health trusts and other private hospitals and clinics over a three month period from January to March 1999. The results will be available later this year.

Older People (Care)

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what initiatives he is taking to improve the recuperation and rehabilitation services available for older people. [65323]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* A letter issued by the Government in 1997 entitled "Better Services for Vulnerable People" presented a programme of work which included as one of its objectives the improvement of recuperation and rehabilitation services for older people. It focused on three specific initiatives:

the development of joint investment plans in continuing care and mental health;

a national development programme which focuses on rehabilitation;

the development of a national framework for multi-disciplinary assessment in acute and community health care settings, jointly with social services.

This initiative was aimed at all vulnerable people but specifically mentioned older people as a priority for early work.

Through the additional £159 million winter pressures funding announced in November 1998 and the £65 million additional funds made available in the summer to support sustained reductions in waiting lists, health authorities and National Health Service trusts working with social services have been required to target investment in better community rehabilitation and recuperation schemes to enable patients to return home safely.

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the timetable for National Health Service trusts to take action to ensure they have in place adequate resources and quality assurance systems for older people in hospital. [65319]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* A Health Circular (HSC 1998/220) was distributed to chief executives of all health authorities and NHS trusts on 27 November 1998, together with a copy of the report commissioned from Health Advisory Service 2000 "Not Because They Are Old" concerning the care of older people on acute wards in hospital, requiring immediate appropriate remedial action where the essentials of care are not being provided.

The national service framework for older people will set standards for the care of older people. Progress against these standards will be monitored and performance will be made public. The national service framework will be developed over the next year to be operational from April 2000.

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will carry out a review of the merits of integrating care of the elderly with acute medical services. [65335]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The new national service framework for older people will focus on those parts of the National Health Service that are particularly important to older people. It will look at how services are organised and delivered, and where appropriate define service models based on best practice.

Mental Health (Nutrition)

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will commission trials to assess the efficacy of nutritional therapy in treating mental health problems; [65975]

(2) what action he is taking to ensure that doctors are aware of evidence linking nutrition and forms of mental illness. [65976]

Mr. Hutton: There is no strong evidence that nutritional deficiencies play a role in the causation of schizophrenia nor that nutritional therapy has a role in its treatment. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutritional Policy have set up a subgroup to look at folic acid and the prevention of disease, which includes mental illness.

Child Abuse

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what Government funding is available for voluntary organisations that assist child abuse sufferers. [65968]

Mr. Hutton: Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968 (S64) gives Ministers the power to make grants to voluntary organisations.

During the financial year 1998–99 the Department is providing a total of £416,324 in funding to six voluntary organisations assisting children at risk of, or who have experienced, child abuse;

The organisations are:

Childline, established in 1986 to listen to, comfort and protect children in trouble or danger. Funding for 1998–99, £163,000 core funding and £10,000 for the dedicated line for children in care.

St Christopher's Fellowship, providing care and accommodation to vulnerable children and young people. Funding for 1998–99, £25,000.

Kidscape, a registered charity founded in 1984 to prevent child abuse and bullying. Funding for 1998–99, £30,000.

Parentline UK, a national helpline established in 1993 to contribute to the prevention of child abuse and neglect by providing a service for anyone parenting a child. Funding for 1998–99, £25,000.

Churches Child Protection Advisory Service helps leaders of churches and children's organisations by providing advice and guidance on issues of child abuse and protection, and supporting individual children and families. Funding for 1998–99, £26,550.

Barnardos, a project to support children vulnerable to sexual exploitation and those involved in prostitution. Funding for 1998–99, £111,774.

Opportunities for Volunteering Scheme

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what new funding will be made available in 1999–2000 for grants under the Opportunities for Volunteering scheme. [66092]

Mr. Hutton: The Department will provide funding of £6.9 million for the Opportunities for Volunteering Scheme in 1999–2000. The funding will enable existing grant commitments to be met while the Department develops, in consultation with the Opportunities for Volunteering, national voluntary organisations and other interested parties, its overall strategy to promote volunteering and targeting of the scheme. While the strategy is being developed it would not make sense for new Opportunities for Volunteering grants to be made, committing future funding. The position from 2000–01 will be included in the consideration of the strategy.

Young Carers

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what initiatives the Government are undertaking to address problems faced by young carers. [66059]

Mr. Hutton: The National Strategy for Carers, announced by my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister last June, has been looking in depth at the needs of young carers, including, among other issues, at what action is already being taken through schools and how that can be enhanced. A United Kingdom consultative conference was held on 19 November 1998 to discuss how the needs of all carers might be better met and among the delegates present were representatives of young carers organisations. Through our national priorities guidance for health and social services authorities, we are also asking general practitioners, primary care teams and social services authorities to identify carers. We are also testing a new data collection system, the Referrals, Assessments and Packages of Care, in social services departments. Under this system, social services authorities will collect information about the assessments undertaken and carers identified. The data will be broken down by broad age group, including for young people under 18.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Cuba

3. **Mr. McAllion:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has held with representatives of the Cuban Government on their relations with the United States of America and Britain. [64587]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State visited Cuba in October and held discussions with the Vice-President and a number of Cuban Ministers. In November she received Sr. Cabrisas, Cuban Minister for Foreign Trade and discussed UK bilateral relations, among other subjects. Our Ambassador in Havana last month raised Cuba/US relations with the Cuban Government.

Middle East Peace Process

15. **Mr. Alan Johnson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance he has provided to the Palestinian Authority in combating terrorism. [64601]

Mr. Fatchett: We make a significant contribution to the $8 million EU package of counter-terrorism assistance to the Palestinian Authority to help it deliver its security commitments.

22. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the prospects for peace in the middle east following the Wye agreement. [64608]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave in the House today to my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and for Milton-Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey).

27. **Mr. Galloway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in the middle east peace process; and if he will make a statement. [64613]

29. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to support the Palestinian Authority in developing a sound economy. [64615]

32. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress of the middle east peace process. [64618]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friends to the oral answer given today by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) and for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), *Official Report*, column 694.

Government Hospitality (Wine)

17. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the purchase of wine for Government hospitality purposes. [64603]

Mr. Fatchett: The policy is intended to ensure availability of wines of appropriate quality at reasonable cost for official hospitality hosted by Ministers on behalf of HMG.

Falkland Islands

18. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the economic future of the Falkland Islands. [64604]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Licence revenue from a well managed fishery has enabled the Falkland Islands Government to build up healthy reserves of more than £143 million without receiving any aid from the UK budget since 1992. The islanders are diversifying their agriculture, promoting tourism and the service sector and investing in better infrastructure and public services, while safeguarding their environment. It is too early to say whether there is oil in recoverable quantities in Falklands waters.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals the Government have received from President Clinton concerning negotiations over, and the sovereignty of, the Falkland Islands. [65819]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have received no proposals from President Clinton concerning negotiations over, or the sovereignty of, the Falkland Islands. The American Government have reiterated that they would like to see two of their close friends overcome their differences, but that it is not appropriate for them to be involved.

Franco-British European Defence Initiative

20. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the implications for the United Kingdom's foreign policy of the Franco-British European defence initiative. [64606]

33. **Mr. Sutcliffe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the foreign policy implications of the Franco-British European defence initiative. [64619]

Mr. Robin Cook: It is firmly in Britain's interests for Europe to speak and act more effectively on the world stage. But, as recent events in Kosovo have shown, a stronger and more coherent European voice in international foreign policy must be backed by a more effective European military capability. The St. Malo Declaration of 4 December set out a framework for building this capacity.

This initiative has been welcomed by the US Government, to whom we have it made it clear that NATO will remain the cornerstone of European security and the basis of our collective defence.

Ethiopia and Eritrea (Border Dispute)

21. **Mr. Donald Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what efforts have been made by his Department *(a)* bilaterally and *(b)* in cooperation with EU partners to encourage the Eritrean Government to respond positively to the proposals presented by the Organisation of African Unity to Ethiopia and Eritrea on 7 and 8 November relating to the settlement of their border dispute. [64607]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have taken advantage of bilateral meetings with Eritrean Government representatives in Asmara and London to reinforce the message that full acceptance of the OAU proposals provide the way forward.

After the OAU issued its proposals on 7–8 November we supported an EU Presidency statement urging both parties to commit themselves to full acceptance. The Presidency Declaration of 16 December reiterated this position.

Syria

23. **Dr. Vis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his recent visit to Syria. [64609]

Mr. Fatchett: I visited Syria from 8 to 10 December and had useful meetings with President Asad and Foreign Minister Shara'a. Our talks focused on the Middle East Peace Process, Iraq and bilateral issues.

Iraq

24. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Iraq. [64610]

Mr. Robin Cook: We remain committed to maintaining international pressure on Iraq to fulfil its obligations and to preventing Iraq from threatening its neighbours once again. We are at one with our friends and allies on this. Our main priorities are to resolve outstanding disarmament questions and to improve further the humanitarian situation in Iraq. Discussions in the Security Council are focusing on both issues. We are also looking with EU partners at proposals for alleviating the suffering to which Saddam Hussein continues to subject the Iraqi people.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the claim by Mr. Scott Ritter that UNSCOM supplied information to five countries in return for intelligence from their sources; and if he will make a statement. [66102]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: UNSCOM is entitled to seek information and advice from all possible sources in pursuit of its mandate to destroy Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability.

UNSCOM Executive Chairman Richard Butler has made it clear that he has always insisted on all UNSCOM activity being carried out strictly in pursuit of its disarmament mandate, not to benefit any individual member state.

Afghanistan (Women)

25. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received on the position of women in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [64611]

Mr. Fatchett: We receive frequent representation about the plight of women and girls in Afghanistan. At the start of our EU Presidency last year we drew up and agreed a new Common Position on Afghanistan. This urges the Afghan factions to end discrimination and promote equal rights. We ensured that UN Security Council Resolutions 1193 and 1214 did the same. We will continue to urge all factions fully to respect human rights.

Sudan

26. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Sudan. [64612]

Mr. Fatchett: The situation in Sudan continues to cause us great concern. While humanitarian conditions in some of the areas worst hit by famine have stabilised, UN agencies expect there to be continuing substantial need in 1999. The suffering is, of course, made much worse by the continuing civil war.

We are therefore working with the UN and others to improve the delivery of aid at the same time as pressing all sides to work towards a peaceful settlement to the civil war—the only long-term solution to the humanitarian crisis.

We continue to support the IGAD peace process as the best way to bring about a negotiated end to the civil war. In this context, UN Special Envoy Vraalsen will shortly be visiting the region, as will an IGAD Partners Forum mission. We are lending our full support to these initiatives.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects the British Ambassador to Sudan to return to Khartoum. [66490]

Mr. Fatchett: When my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary ordered the withdrawal of British staff from our Embassy in Khartoum on 27 August 1998, he said that it was only a temporary withdrawal and that he hoped the necessary conditions for the return of staff would be re-established before too long.

We are in regular contact with the Sudanese Government through their Embassy in London. British staff from our Embassy in Khartoum, who are currently based in Nairobi, have also made a number of visits to Sudan.

Arms Control and Disarmament

28. **Mr. Canavan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what current discussions he is having on arms control and disarmament; and if he will make a statement. [64614]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are committed to the measures set out in the Strategic Defence Review, and are pursuing these with a wide range of interested parties. In particular, we will participate fully in forthcoming negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, and on a verification Protocol to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, and are working for the successful completion of talks on the adaptation of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty.

United Nations (Subscriptions)

30. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of the United States of America concerning the payment of arrears to the United Nations. [64616]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary last raised this issue with Madeleine Albright early last year. Since then we have used our Presidencies of the EU and the G8, and numerous other contacts at ministerial and official level, to urge the US quickly to settle its arrears to the UN. We will continue to raise this issue with the US Administration and Congress when we judge this will be effective.

Burma

31. **Mr. Khabra:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to encourage democracy in Burma. [64617]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) in the House today, *Official Report*, columns 701–02.

St. Helena

34. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has reached a conclusion on the citizenship rights of St. Helenans. [64621]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral answer I gave earlier in the House today to the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), *Official Report*, column 689.

Kashmir

35. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he proposes to have with representatives of Pakistan and India on their forthcoming discussions about Kashmir. [64622]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral answer I gave in the House today to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell), *Official Report*, column 695.

Russia (Weapons Command and Control)

36. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assurances he has received from the Russian Government about the integrity of its command and control over its weapons of mass destruction. [64623]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have not received any direct assurances. We have, however, taken careful note of statements made by senior Russian representatives assuring the safety and control of Russia's weapons of mass destruction, including a statement of 25 November made by the Russian Minister for Atomic Energy, Mr. Adamov.

Dubai

37. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about relations with Dubai. [64624]

Mr. Fatchett: Our relations with Dubai, as with the United Arab Emirates as a whole, are very close. We work together closely on a range of international issues. In addition, British exports to Dubai were worth over £900 million in 1997. Despite the general down-turn in the global economy 1998 saw another strong trade performance with UK exports until the end of October alone worth over £1.3 billion. We expect a similar result this year.

Embassies (Business Promotion)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in improving the business promotion activities of British embassies. [64605]

Mr. Fatchett: There is a number of initiatives in progress to strengthen further the export promotion services offered by our 219 commercial posts overseas. Implementation of Export Forum recommendations has given a sharper focus on priority markets, and following the Comprehensive Spending Review we will be creating over 120 new commercial slots overseas. To strengthen our professionalism we have increased interchange between the private sector and FCO/DTI staff and refocused staff training and development programmes. Our expanded Quality Management System shows increased levels of customer satisfaction. 1999 will see further improved levels of service provision with greater use of information technology/Internet based services by overseas commercial posts based on the TradeUk service launched in September 1998.

South Africa (Trade Negotiations)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress in the EU-South Africa trade negotiations. [65659]

Ms Quin: We remain actively committed to finalising a Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and South Africa. We regret that the deadline agreed at the Cardiff European Council for conclusion of the negotiations by the end of 1998 was not met. The Vienna European Council in December 1998 called for the negotiations to be finalised as soon as possible, and no later than the informal Council to be held in March 1999. We will continue to press for a rapid and liberal outcome which honours the EU's commitments to help the South African transition from apartheid, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reiterated to Deputy President Mbeki during his recent visit to South Africa.

British Council (Damascus)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the cost of recent damage to the British Council offices in Damascus. [65386]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The cost of the damage to the British Council property in Damascus is still being evaluated.

Mr. Bruce Harris

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has had with the Guatemalan Government concerning the legal case of Mr. Bruce Harris; and if he will make a statement. [65912]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Our Ambassador in Guatemala City has raised the case of Bruce Harris and made known our concerns to the President of the Guatemalan Supreme Court, the President of the Guatemalan Presidential Commission on Human Rights and to the Guatemalan Fiscal General. We shall continue to follow the case closely and to make known our concern to the Guatemalan authorities that the case is conducted in conformity with the human rights standards to which Guatemala is committed under its domestic law and international obligations.

Gibraltar (Fishing)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will define the extent of British waters around Gibraltar. [65505]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* British waters extend to a limit of three nautical miles around Gibraltar. The limit is restricted to two nautical miles on the west side, in the Bay of Algeciras, where a median line exists between British and Spanish waters. I have placed copies of a map showing territorial waters in the Gibraltar area in the Libraries of the House.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of Spanish fishing boats based in Algeciras Bay. [65510]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* We do not have a reliable figure. We are aware of 33 fishing vessels based in Algeciras port which have been sighted and recorded as entering British waters around Gibraltar. Similar numbers of other vessels based in both La Linea (also in Algeciras Bay) and La Atunara (to the east of Gibraltar) have also been seen in British waters.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many incursions into British waters around Gibraltar have been made by Spanish fishing boats in each of the last three years. [65509]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The royal Gibraltar Police recorded 520 occasions on which Spanish fishing boats entered Gibraltar waters in 1998. Detailed records were not kept in previous years.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many arrests of Spanish fishermen unlawfully fishing in British waters around Gibraltar have been made in each of the last three years. [65508]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Figures for the arrest of Spanish Fishermen for illegal fishing in British waters around Gibraltar are as follows:

1996: None

1997: 4 fishermen in one incident

1998: 6 fishermen in two incidents.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the definition of the status quo with regard to the activities of Spanish fishing boats in British waters around Gibraltar. [65507]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Between 1991 and 1997, Spanish fishermen entered Gibraltar waters and fished in moderate numbers, kept away from the harbour and Admiralty waters, and respected the authority of the law enforcement agencies. We have been seeking to return to that situation, including through discussion with the Spanish authorities.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evidence he has evaluated of the use by Spanish fishermen in British waters around Gibraltar of unlawful fishing equipment. [65506]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Section 10(b) of the Gibraltar Nature Protection Ordinance 1991 provides that the use of, inter alia, any seine or gill net or any pot or device for raking of sea bed, for the purpose of killing or taking any wild animal, constitutes an offence. The use of any fishing equipment other than fishing lines is therefore unlawful. Spanish fishing boats have used a variety of nets and rakes.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Spanish Foreign Minister on the possibility of a licensing and quota agreement for Spanish fishing boats in British waters around Gibraltar. [66247]

Ms Quin: I have discussed the fishing dispute on several occasions with the Spanish Minister for European Affairs. In these discussions, the possibility of a licensing regime has been raised as one option for the way forward.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Millennium Compliance (Emergency Calls)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to ensure that the telephone network in Lancashire is millennium compliant, with particular reference to emergency calls. [66025]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* In Lancashire, as elsewhere in the UK, Oftel has responsibility for safeguarding the integrity of the core telecommunications network and has established a Year 2000 project to monitor and assess the telecommunications industry's preparations. Oftel has taken steps to ensure that telecoms services are not disrupted over the millennium. All the main network operators, who are co-operating with Oftel and the Home Office, are taking the issue seriously, and have outlined their plans to meet this challenge. The main network operators already have sophisticated systems in place to safeguard the provision of emergency services over their networks and their current work on the Millennium Bug is building on the resilience already built in to these companies' systems. Oftel is keeping the preparations of the network operators under review.

Action 2000 is working closely with Oftel to ensure rigorous assessment programmes are in place, and a peer review of the telecom operators is already being undertaken, permitting the industry's most technically able experts to collaborate in checking peer companies' systems. It is difficult to make a precise assessment of the likelihood of interruption. Oftel expects that the principal sectors of the industry will be Year 2000 compliant during the first half of 1999.

Miller Dywidag

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the official trading status of Miller Dywidag Joint Venture. [66337]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Companies House has no record of Miller Dywidag as having incorporated status.

Ministerial Appointments

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs was appointed; when he received his first red box; and when he first went to his departmental office. [65622]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs was appointed on 28 July 1998. He first went to the Department on 29 July 1998 and received his first red box on 30 July 1998.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Minister for Science was appointed; when he received his first red box; and when he first went to his departmental office. [65621]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Minister for Science was appointed on 28 July. He received his first Ministerial box on Tuesday 11 August and first went to his departmental office on 30 July.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry was appointed; when he received his first red box; and when he first went to his departmental office. [65624]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry was appointed on 4 January 1999. He has not received any red boxes to date, preferring to work from the Department. He first went into his departmental office on 5 January 1999.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he was appointed; when he received his first red box; and when he first went to his departmental office. [65623]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* I was appointed on 23 December 1998. I received my first red box on Christmas Eve, having been in my departmental office during the course of that day.

BAe-GEC Marconi

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will refer the proposed merger of BAe and GEC Marconi to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. [65749]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* In the event of such a proposal, it would be necessary to determine whether the merger fell for consideration by the Commission under the EC Merger Regulation, or by the UK authorities under the Fair Trading Act 1973. If a merger fell for consideration under the Fair Trading Act, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry would decide whether or not to refer it to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission in the light of the advice of the Director General of Fair Trading. Each case is considered on its own merits.

Competition (Defence Industries)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the purposes of the proposed Competition Bill will include the creation and encouragement of competition in the United Kingdom in the defence industries. [66330]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Competition Act will establish a more effective regime to deter and tackle anti-competitive agreements and abuses of dominant market position widely across the economy, including within the defence sector.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the compatibility of EU policy on defence industrial company mergers with his approach to competition matters in the United Kingdom. [66331]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* We share the European Commission's view of the importance of taking into account competition policy issues in considering restructuring in the defence industry. Any merger proposals will be considered on their merits by the relevant competition authorities.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 18 November regarding mineshafts. [66585]

Mr. Battle: After having the issues raised in my hon. Friend's letter fully looked into, I replied on 14 January.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 14 December regarding trades union legislation. [66584]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I will write very shortly.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if the term "average cost", with reference to flights by Ministers in his Department, refers to the average cost per passenger; [64721]

(2) what was the total cumulative cost to his Department of ministerial use of RAF flights in the year to 1 May 1997. [64737]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* As my answer of 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 838, made clear, Ministers are required under the terms of the Ministerial Code always to make efficient and cost effective travel arrangements. The rules on travel for Ministers are the same as those that applied to the previous Administration. A comparison of travel by Ministers on RAF flights between the 16 month period between 2 May 1997 and 30 September 1998 is not directly comparable with the 12 months of the previous administration.

The average cost contained in my earlier reply referred to the cost per trip and not the individual cost per passenger. This Department was created from the former Departments of the Environment and Transport in June 1997 and also has the additional responsibilities of the Deputy Prime Minister. A direct comparison with previous years is not therefore possible. I am advised that the total cost of Ministerial flights provided by the RAF for the Departments of the Environment and Transport in the year to 1 May 1997 was £6,302. Cabinet Office was responsible for any expenditure incurred by the then Deputy Prime Minister.

Countryside Access

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on Access to the Open Countryside in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [65674]

Mr. Meacher: My Department has received over 2,000 formal responses to our consultation paper, *Access to the Open Countryside in England & Wales*. In addition, since the closing date for responses to the consultation paper on 5 June, approximately 370 letters have been received from members of the public on this subject, and approximately 400 letters from Members of Parliament. Ministerial colleagues and I have held meetings with a number of organisations representing both landowners and recreational users.

Sewerage Network

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much of the public and private sewerage network is currently subject to *(a)* infiltration and *(b)* exfiltration. [65885]

Mr. Meale: The Department does not collect this information. Under section 94 of the Water Industry Act 1991, sewerage undertakers are responsible for the effectual drainage of their areas and for maintaining their pipework. From meetings held with the water and sewerage industry last year, there appears to be no evidence that exfiltration or infiltration in public sewers is causing any major problems. I understand that Water UK will be carrying out research in this area later this year.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the necessary change in investment in the sewerage system following the inclusion of the condition of sewerage assets in the new sustainable development indicators. [65886]

Mr. Meale: Levels of investment in the public sewerage system are a matter for sewerage undertakers and the Director General of Water Services. In "Raising the Quality" (September 1998), we published guidance to the Director General of Water Services which covered sewer maintenance as well as investment in new assets. The Director General subsequently published his own forward look at the necessary investment programmes of water companies and their price implications in "Prospects for Prices" (October 1998).

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the water companies OFWAT has penalised for failing to meet their targets on flooding from sewers and collapses *(a)* between 1990 and 1995 and *(b)* from 1995 to date. [65887]

Mr. Meale: Companies' performance is reported each year in the Director General of Water Services' annual Report on Levels of Service. The 1997–98 Report shows that the proportion of properties at risk from sewer flooding more than twice in every ten years has fallen substantially from 0.13 per cent. in 1990–91 to 0.06 per cent. in 1997–98. The annual Report also explains regulatory action taken in respect of companies about whose performance the Director has concerns. Where the Director has concerns over levels of sewer flooding, he requires the company to take remedial action. The Director does not currently have powers to impose fines, but has indicated his intention to take sewer flooding and other aspects of companies' past performance into account when setting price limits.

Sewer flooding that affects customers' properties is penalised by compensation available to customers in the Guaranteed Standards Scheme. In 1997–98, payments of up to a maximum of £1,000 were made to 4,367 customers who made claims.

There are no targets for sewer collapses but they are taken into account when OFWAT assesses the serviceability to customers of the companies assets. Serviceability is in turn taken into account when the Director sets companies' price limits.

Water Extraction

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many gallons of water have been extracted by Thames Water from the River Darenth in each of the last five years; and how many gallons it is estimated will be extracted in each of the next five years. [66008]

Mr. Meale: Thames Water Utilities Ltd. make no direct abstractions from the River Darenth itself but the company does abstract groundwater from the river's catchment. The actual and forecast groundwater abstractions by the company from this catchment are set out below. Phase 1 of the Darenth Action Plan came into operation on 1 January 1997 and the forecast figures assume that Phase 2 will become operational, as planned, in 2001–02.

million gallons

Year	*Actual abstraction*
1993–94	5002.3
1994–95	6231.7
1995–96	6339.8
1996–97	5499.6
1997–98	4792.1

million gallons

Year	*Forecast abstraction*
1998–99	4818.0
1999–2000	4818.0
2000–01	4818.0
2001–02	4095.0
2002–03	4095.0

Unadopted Roads

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what is his estimate of the number of unadopted roads in England; [65896]

(2) what is his current estimate of the number of unadopted roads made up in each of the last five years, excluding newly-built estates; [65897]

(3) what estimate he has made of the number of people who live on unadopted roads in England. [65895]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer to a written question on the same subject on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *118*, from my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes).

Given that no central records of unadopted roads exist, it is also not possible to give an overall estimate for England of the number of people who live in them.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the financial allocation made to local authorities for the making up of unadopted roads in the local government settlement 1999–2000. [65898]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Financial allocations to local authorities in the 1999–2000 Revenue Support Grant settlement are based on characteristics of local authorities including the lengths of adopted roads weighted to reflect their classifications. RSG is however an unhypothecated grant. The settlement takes no account of unadopted roads, whose upkeep is, in the majority of cases, the responsibility of the frontagers.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish his consultation paper on the treatment of contaminated land. [66091]

Mr. Meale: Our target date for publication of a consultation paper, which will set out a revised draft of the statutory guidance to be issued under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, is the end of February at the latest.

New Housing

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of new housing was built on greenfield sites in each year from 1992 to 1998. [65759]

Mr. Raynsford: There is no specific definition of 'greenfield' land. The information available relates to housing built on land that has not been previously developed. The Department's Land Use Change Statistics for England provide information on (a) the percentage of new dwellings (excluding conversions) built on land not previously developed for urban uses and (b) the proportion of land used for new housing that was not previously developed. The table shows results for the above measures for the period 1992 to 1996 (the most recent available).

Previously undeveloped land used for new housing

Year	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*[2]	*Average 1992–1996*
Percentage of new dwellings[1] built on land not previously developed	47	48	51	47	47	48
Percentage of land used for new housing that was not previously developed	54	53	56	52	53	54

[1] Excludes conversions
[2] Provisional estimate
Source:
Land Use Change Statistics

Waste Strategy

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what responses he has received to his consultation paper on a waste strategy, "Less Waste: More Value"; what is the time scale for implementation of that waste strategy; what conclusions he has reached on the subjects of *(a)* waste minimisation and *(b)* recycling; and if he will make a statement. [65769]

Mr. Meale: The Government's consultation paper on reviewing the waste management strategy for England and Wales, "Less Waste: More Value", was launched by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 9 June 1998. During the consultation period over 28,000 copies of the document were distributed. The consultation period ended on 25 September 1998, by which time 652 submissions had been received by my Department, including 267 submissions from local authorities. In addition, 137 members of the public wrote to Ministers following the launch of the consultation document and its attendant publicity in the media.

"Less Waste: More Value" set out a range of options and questions on what policies the Government should pursue, in order to:

- encourage, and emphasise the importance of, actions to minimise the waste that we produce (both in terms of volume and hazardousness); and
- substantially increase the recycling and composting rates for waste, as part of an integrated strategy which also addresses the issue of waste that it does not make sense to recycle.

We are now in the process of developing these policies, which will be published for consultation, as part of the draft of the new waste strategy for England and Wales. The Government intend to publish a draft of the new waste strategy during the Spring of 1999 and will consult with all interested parties during the Summer. We plan to publish a final version of the new waste strategy as a Command Paper before the end of 1999.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he has sought regarding the strategy to be pursued to achieve the Government's waste recycling targets for Greater London; how the Government intend to achieve these targets without placing greater reliance on landfill sites;

what is his strategy regarding incineration and the development of combined heat and power; and if he will make a statement. [65771]

Mr. Meale: The new Mayor of London will have a duty to prepare an integrated municipal waste management strategy for London. This will have regard to the national waste strategy, due to be published later this year, and local authority waste recycling plans. In the meantime, the Government are providing London Boroughs with £12 million under the Capital Challenge Programme to boost recycling levels in London.

Waste to energy incineration must be considered in the context of an integrated approach to waste management, which encourages waste minimisation, re-use and recycling. Where waste incineration with energy recovery is the best practicable environmental option, the potential for incorporating CHP should always be considered in order to maximise the energy which is recovered.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what role he envisages for incineration in achieving his waste strategy for London; what plans he has to place a moratorium on the development or expansion of incinerator capacity; what advice his Department will issue to local authorities on *(a)* the scale of any future facilities and *(b)* the length of disposal contracts for incineration; and if he will make a statement. [65770]

Mr. Meale: Waste incineration is currently an integral part of waste disposal in London and in the consultation paper issued last year on the national waste strategy the Government took the view that there was likely to be a need for higher levels of incineration with energy recovery in future. We do not plan to place a moratorium on the development or expansion of incinerator capacity in London, nor do we plan to issue advice to local authorities on the scale of future facilities or the length of disposal contracts.

Bus Fuel Rebate Scheme

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was paid *(a)* in total and *(b)* to individual bus companies under the bus fuel rebate scheme in each of the last five years. [66017]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested in *(a)* is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1993–94	220
1994–95	224
1995–96	229
1996–97	228
1997–98	227

Expenditure is expected to be £270 million in this financial year, reflecting the increase in the rate of rebate in line with this year's increase in duty.

The amount paid to individual bus companies is regarded as commercially confidential.

Biosafety Protocol

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if Her Majesty's Government support the application of the Biosafety Protocol's proposed procedures for Advanced Informed Agreement to agricultural commodities and commodities designated for processing, where such commodities contain genetically modified organisms or parts thereof; and if he will oppose any attempts in the protocol negotiations to exclude such commodities from the AIA procedures. [66036]

Mr. Meale: The Government's view is that the Protocol should cover the transboundary movement of all living modified organisms (LMOs), including LMOs that are agricultural commodities and commodities intended for processing. The Advanced Informed Agreement procedures should apply to transboundary movements of LMOs intended for deliberate release, including commodities. The UK is still considering its position on appropriate procedures for commodities intended for processing and will press hard for adequate coverage to secure environmental safety. Commodities that consist of non-living products of LMOs should not be covered by the protocol since the scope set out in the mandate from the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity is to develop a protocol focusing specifically on the transboundary movement of living modified organisms.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if Her Majesty's Government supports proposals to include provisions in the Biosafety Protocol to allow countries to take socio-economic considerations into account when reaching a decision on whether to grant advanced informed agreement to allow the proposed import of a GMO to proceed. [65963]

Mr. Meale: The Government consider that the basis for decision-making under the Protocol should be a scientific risk assessment, but recognise that some countries may wish to consider socio-economic aspects in reaching their decision on whether to grant advance informed agreement.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions whether his Department will support proposals to include provisions for a regime for strict liability within the Biosafety Protocol. [65962]

Mr. Meale: The Government acknowledge the importance of the issue of liability and redress in the context of damage to biological diversity and its relevance to the Biosafety Protocol. For this reason, the UK and the European Commission last year hosted a small international workshop to explore the issues arising in relation to the Protocol. The Government consider that provisions for a regime for strict liability cannot be developed in the short time remaining to complete the negotiations. I hope, however, that it will be possible at the final meeting of the Biosafety Working Group developing the Protocol to agree how the matter might be taken forward, bearing in mind the ongoing discussions in the context of Article 14 of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Driving Instructors

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *194*, over the four year period under consideration *(a)* how many driving instructors were accepted for registration, *(b)* how many of these were subsequently removed from registration within (i) six months, (ii) one year, (iii) 18 months, and (iv) two years, *(c)* what was the average period that those removed from the register had previously been registered, and *(d)* how many people paid examination fees to the Driving Standards Agency. [65725]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* During the four years up to 30 November 1998, 7,225 new instructors have been added to the Register of Approved Driving Instructors (ADI). Of these six have been subsequently removed as a result of failing a check test of their instructional ability following three successive check test failures. None were removed in the first 18 months of their registration. Three were removed within their first two years of registration, and the other three were removed between two and four years of registration. The average period they were on the Register was 26 months.

To join the register, a person has to pass a three part examination—a written test, a practical test of driving ability and a practical test of instructional ability for which the fees are currently £50 for the written test and £62 for practical test. During the same 4 year period, some 24,000 people started the ADI qualifying process, taking a total of 46,000 written tests and the Driving Standards Agency also conducted 58,164 practical tests (figures for the two practical tests are not compiled separately). Some of the tests would have been further attempts by unsuccessful candidates.

Chapter 2 Aircraft

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions from what date all Chapter 2 aircraft are currently planned to be banned from United Kingdom airports; and what proposals there are in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the EU to review that date. [66149]

Ms Glenda Jackson: From 1 April 2002, Chapter 2 aircraft will be banned from UK airports other than in the most exceptional circumstances. There are no proposals in the UK or the EU to review that date.

London Underground

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the amounts of compensation payable by London Underground as a result of the breakdown of the tube system on 12 January. [66390]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Statistics regarding compensation claims arising from specific incidents are not routinely analysed by London Underground. It is too early to establish how many people will request compensation for service problems experienced on 12 January, An average claim under the Customer Charter is, however, £2.60.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66215]

Mr. Meale: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Prime Minister on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*, in response to a Question from my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

Pesticides

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the relative effectiveness of economic instruments over other measures designed to minimise pesticide use; [66213]

(2) what plans he has for a compensation regime for farmers and agricultural producers to offset the effects of a pesticide tax. [66229]

Mr. Meale: The Government have commissioned extensive research work on economic instruments as a component of its pesticide minimisation policy to be used in combination with other measures. In considering the possible introduction of a pesticide tax, we shall look very carefully at the potential impact on farmers and other pesticide users.

Bus Fuel Duty Rebate

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what proportion of bus operators receiving bus fuel duty rebate are using standard diesel fuel; [66104]

(2) how much is spent annually through the bus fuel duty rebate in supporting bus operators using standard diesel fuel. [66106]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Most of the claims for bus fuel duty rebate are for use of standard diesel fuel. The estimated spend this financial year is £267 million.

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage bus operators in receipt of bus fuel duty rebate to adopt ultra low sulphur diesel fuel. [66105]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* A number of possible changes to bus Fuel Duty Rebate, to encourage the use of cleaner fuels and vehicles, are being examined with a view to consultation in due course.

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many bus operators are receiving bus fuel duty rebate. [66103]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* There are currently 1,800 claimants receiving bus fuel duty rebate. This figure includes subsidiaries or other operating units of larger companies.

School Transport Working Group

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list

the members of the working group on school transport; and if he will publish the remit of the group, its target deliverables and timetable for action. [65936]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I announced the membership and remit of the School Travel Advisory Group (STAG) in a press notice on 18 December (Working together to improve the journey to school). A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

STAG will work to identify practical ways of reducing car use and improving safety on the journey to school, with a view to making a report to Ministers. It will also oversee the preparation of guidance for local authorities and schools. It is hoped to complete both in the course of the year.

Water Meters

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate how many people will financially *(a)* benefit and *(b)* be worse off as a result of the introduction of water meters; if he will provide this information (i) for the population as a whole and (ii) for the population over state retirement age; and if he will make a statement. [66382]

Mr. Meale: The following estimates are taken from the report, "Incidence Effects of Charging for Domestic Water and Sewerage Services" published by my Department in July 1998. This reported the results of modelling work undertaken on behalf of the Department by Maxwell Stamp Plc. The figures relate to households in England and Wales where there is a choice between measured and unmeasured options. The estimates assume no consequent reduction in consumption or tariff rebalancing. The outcome depends on the tariffs adopted by companies for unmeasured and for measured charging.

(i) Under the current tariffs of water undertakers: 40 per cent. of households would pay less on a measured than they would on an unmeasured basis of charging. 55 per cent. of pensioner households would pay less on a measured than unmeasured basis of charging.

(ii) Assuming a measured basis without standing charge: 44 per cent. of households would pay less on a measured than they would on an unmeasured basis of charging. 63 per cent. of pensioner households would pay less on a measured than unmeasured basis of charging.

The Government's policy, reflected in the Water Industry Bill, is that domestic consumers presently charged on an unmeasured basis should have the option of requesting a measured basis of charging. The Bill would also give new rights to customers paying an unmeasured charge, to continue paying on an unmeasured basis on their present homes where they are using water only for essential household use.

Valuation Appeals

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many valuation appeals have been lodged since 11 March 1998 in which the appellant cites the decision in the Benjamin vs Anston Properties Ltd. case. [66511]

Ms Armstrong: A total of some 135,000 proposals to alter the rating list were made during the period 1 April to 31 December 1998. It is not possible to say how many of these proposals will rely on the Lands Tribunal decision in Benjamin vs Anston Properties in support of their proposals.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his oral statement of 11 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 71, if he will publish the evidence and working papers on which he based his estimate of the number of properties which might be in a sufficient state of disrepair to encourage owners to appeal against their valuation for rating purposes. [66513]

Ms Armstrong: It is not possible to say with any accuracy how many properties are in disrepair at any one time. However, the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) believe that most non-domestic properties will require routine repairs to be carried out within a 3 to 5 year cycle, and it is likely that some properties would not have such work carried out within this normal repair cycle.

The VOA estimate that a maximum of 15 per cent. of the total of 1.7 million non-domestic properties may fall into this category at any one point in time, and that their condition may be such that the occupiers may seek to obtain a reduction in their rate liability as a result.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information an appellant must supply in order to lodge a valuation appeal. [66512]

Ms Armstrong: The information to be provided in making a proposal to alter the rating list is specified in regulation 5A of the Non-Domestic Rating (Alteration of Lists and Appeals) Regulations 1993 (SI 1993/291 as amended). A proposal should include the name and address of the proposer and the capacity in which he makes the proposal; the identity of the property, and the respects in which it is proposed that the list be altered. The proposal should also include a statement of the grounds on which the proposal is made, although this does not restrict the grounds on which an appeal can be argued at a Valuation Tribunal.

Air Services Agreement

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects negotiations with the United States towards a new air services agreement to be completed; and if he will make a statement. [66640]

Dr. Reid: Negotiation with the US broke off last November. It is not known at this stage when formal negotiations will resume or be completed.

A1 (Tyneside)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which categories of traffic he proposes to ban from the A1 corridor between Lobley Mill and North Brunton, Newcastle; if that ban will extend to the New Tyne Crossing; over what hours the ban will be in force; what alternative routes he

proposes; when the ban is to be introduced; and what consultation he proposes to have with local residents and schools that may be affected. [66600]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 19 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked Lawrie Haynes, the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. I am replying in Lawrie's absence from the office. You asked "Which categories of traffic he proposes to ban from the A1 corridor between Lobley Hill and North Brunton, Newcastle; if that ban will extend to the New Tyne Crossing; over what hours the ban will be in force; what alternative routes he proposes; when the ban is to be introduced; and what consultation he proposes to have with local residents and schools that may be affected".

You will know of the considerable peak hour coggestion that occurs on the A1 in Tyneside. It is felt that slow moving vehicles exacerbate this problem and we propose to introduce a ban, by means of an experimental Temporary Traffic Order this Spring.

It is proposed that any vehicle which cannot attain a speed of 30mph on the level in free-flowing conditions will be prohibited from entering the A1 Gateshead and Newcastle Western By-Passes. This will include the sections between Lobley Hill, the Tyne Crossing at Blaydon and North Brunton. The ban, when introduced, will be in force between the hours of 7am to 9am and 4pm to 6pm from Monday to Friday and is expected to be introduced this Spring.

Consultations will be held with local authorities and other representative bodies with the issue or alternative routes being discussed before the ban is introduced. This temporary scheme will be implemented under the powers of an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order. During this time we will monitor the impact on traffic movements and views of any interested individuals or organisations will be welcomed. Any comments received will be taken into account before deciding whether to make the ban permanent.

Clean Development

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the letter of 22 September 1998 (IYR/PSO/16123/98) from the Minister for the Environment to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, if he will give examples of what has been achieved in making progress towards clean development mechanisms under the Kyoto Protocol. [65394]

Mr. Meacher: In Buenos Aires, Parties agreed to give priority to the clean development mechanism (CDM) within the wider work programme on the Kyoto Protocol. The aim is to have all the modalities and procedures established by the sixth Conference of the Parties (COP6—which will probably be in late 2000). The UNFCCC secretariat will convene two technical workshops on the CDM, and the other Kyoto mechanisms, before April of next year.

The EU will submit further proposals on the CDM to the secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change by the end of March as input to these workshops.

Air Freight

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has had from Sir Crispin Tickell on comparisons of cost in carrying *(a)* air freighted vegetables and *(b)* other air freight between (i) Scotland and London and (ii) Asia/Africa/Caribbean/South America and London. [66495]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None.

World Environment Organisation

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has had from Sir Crispin Tickell on the concept of a World Environment Organisation. [66494]

Mr. Meale: I have not received any direct representations from Sir Crispin Tickell on this matter. I am aware, however, that he has spoken publicly on a number of occasions about such an initiative as a counterweight to the World Trade Organisation.

Greater London Authority

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce his decision in respect of the recommendations of the Local Government Commission for the boundaries of the electoral areas for the Assembly of the Greater London Authority. [66596]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government have decided to accept the Commission's recommendations. Subject to the passage of the Greater London Authority Bill as introduced, they will be implemented by secondary legislation after Royal Assent. A copy of the recommendations has been deposited in the Library of the House.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Badger Culling Scheme

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what auditing of the Government's badger culling scheme has been carried out since 2 December; and if he will make a statement. [64837]

Mr. Rooker: Systematic management checks were undertaken in December last year to assess compliance with trial procedures and their uniform application. In addition, members of the Independent Scientific Group, who are monitoring the trial, undertook field visits to check the work.

Coastal Protection

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food by how much in percentage terms *(a)* the highest rate of grant for coastal defence work and *(b)* the normal rate of grant have been reduced since 1997. [66042]

Mr. Morley: The rates of grant available to maritime district councils for approved capital coast protection works have remained unchanged at 35 per cent., 45 per cent., 55 per cent., 65 per cent. and 75 per cent. since 1992. The formula used to determine which rate of grant is applicable to specific works was subject to significant change with effect from 1 April 1997, with a view to bringing the direct government contribution to the national programme within the range 50 to 55 per cent. The announcement of that change was made in November 1996

by the previous administration. The only change to the formula since then was an adjustment by 2 per cent, in line with inflation, made with effect from 1 April 1998.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish his proposals for coastal protection co-ordination for the rest of the period covered by the Comprehensive Spending Review. [66040]

Mr. Morley: Coast protection authorities are encouraged to work within the policy framework published in the "Strategy for Flood and Coastal Defence in England and Wales". As confirmed in the response to the Agriculture Select Committee's report on Flood and Coastal Defence, the Government consider there is scope to enhance the effectiveness of the current arrangements, to improve the co-ordination that takes place and to help ensure delivery of the national strategy. This will be achieved by developing the way in which the Environment Agency exercises its current general flood defence supervisory duty and seeking to establish national targets for all operating authorities. These targets will be published in due course.

The Ministry's concept of Shoreline Management Plans and strategic planning was developed to encourage operating authorities to work together, to consider the impact of their schemes on neighbouring authorities and overall to improve decision-making. The first generation of such Plans is now nearing completion, and all should be published by Spring 1999.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will initiate a review of the Halcrow study on coastal defence. [66043]

Mr. Morley: The Ministry commissioned Halcrows, as lead consultants, to produce the "Coast Protection Survey of England"; it was published in 1994. The survey was reviewed in 1995 and 1996, but these updates showed that the rate of change in the state of defences did not warrant such frequent reviews. Action in 1997 was therefore confined to a review of authorities' plans in respect of defences identified as being in most urgent need of repair. Consideration will now be given to the future development of an asset database of all flood and coastal defences irrespective of operating authority.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which Minister is in overall charge of the UK's strategy for meeting the challenge of climate change and sinkage in coastal areas. [66045]

Mr. Morley: Within Government, overall responsibility for climate change rests with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. So far as the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is concerned, I oversee policies, including the implications for flood and coastal defence, though my right hon. Friend the Minister has overall policy responsibility.

Animal Transport

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which EU countries have implemented EU directive 95/29/EC on live animal transport; and what representations he has made to those which have not. [65735]

Mr. Morley: By the end of 1998, the majority of Member States had implemented the Directive. The crucial point, with live exports from Great Britain in mind, is enforcement of the rules on the ground. We repeatedly remind the other Member States concerned of their responsibilities in this respect.

Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* live sheep and *(b)* live pigs were exported from (i) the United Kingdom and (ii) the port of Dover in 1998 for (1) slaughter, (2) further fattening and (3) breeding; and how many (x) live sheep and (y) live pigs in each of these categories were exported to each individual country of destination. [65787]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested by my hon. Friend will take some time to put together. With his permission, I will write to him once it is available.

Fisheries

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the prospects for decentralising the control of fisheries to zonal management committees within EU member states. [66408]

Mr. Morley: Zonal management committees are one of the ideas being examined by the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. The Federations have been assessing their ideas with their counterparts in other Member States and I shall be interested to see the outcome of these contacts.

Abattoirs (Inspection Charges)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of increased inspection charges on small abattoirs. [66158]

Mr. Rooker: The Government recognise that increases in veterinary supervision levels in small abattoirs will have significant cost implications for their operators, and we have received many representations on this issue. The impact on individual premises will depend on the circumstances prevailing at those premises, including the current level of veterinary supervision, the size and throughput of the premises, the complexity and standard of hygiene of operations, and the type of animal being slaughtered. We continue to keep the matter under review and, bearing in mind our EU legal obligations, to seek to minimise the impact on abattoir operators wherever possible.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 20 January 1999

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Credit Unions

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to support the development of credit unions; and if she will make a statement. [66617]

Clare Short: We are currently involved in a number of projects setting up and strengthening credit unions and self-help groups which provide financial and other services to their members and share the co-operative principles of user-management and mutual-ownership. These range from comparatively small organisations aiming to build the financial asset base of disadvantaged communities in a specific location to self-help group federations and co-operative banks serving large parts of the countries they operate in.

Some examples of current and planned activities include:

In Kenya we are currently preparing a project to assist a number of indigenous savings and credit co-operatives (SACCOs). The main focus will be on improving their accounting and management information systems with a view to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of their work.

In India we are helping to set up the Andhra Pradesh Women's Fund (APWF) which will be owned by member clusters of self-help groups throughout the state of Andhra Pradesh. APWF will provide loans to these member clusters as well as help to mobilise and maintain the quality of clusters joining the APWF.

Through our active involvement with the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP), we are providing support for the establishment of an independent rating agency to supervise select Guatemalan credit unions.

Finally, we are sponsoring practitioners from developing countries to participate in the postgraduate certificate in *co-operative management and organisational development of a credit union* being offered by Leicester University.

We will continue to look at new ways to support credit unions and self-help groups which aim to offer the poor improved access to financial services.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Animated Films

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many animated films were produced in the UK in each year for the past five years; and what was the total level of grants provided for UK-produced animations in each of those years. [65990]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Figures on the numbers of animation films produced in the UK are not available.

Last year's Government/industry Film Policy Review identified the need to improve the coverage and availability of statistical information on the British film industry. My Department is currently exploring the feasibility of establishing a new and more comprehenaive survey of film businesses.

National Lottery film production awards have been available since 1995. Awards to animated films were as follows:

Year	*£*
1998	516,695
1997	613,330
1996	178,500
1995	66,441

In addition, the Arts Council of England contributes £50,000 per annum to a scheme for experimental animation, which it runs in conjunction with Channel 4. The British Film Institute also provides support to regional film and media bodies whose activities in some cases include support for animation.

Hotels (Quality Rating)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has held on the establishment of a new quality rating system for hotels. [65987]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* With the support of this Department, a new harmonised accommodation rating scheme for hotels and guest accommodation was launched by the English Tourist Board, the AA and the RAC last year. Hotels are given a rating of 1 to 5 stars covering the whole visitor experience and Guest Accommodation is rated entirely on quality, using 1 to 5 diamonds. Inspections against the new standards began in January 1998 and the scheme will be launched to customers later this year. It will be included in Guide Books for 2000. The scheme is available through the AA and the RAC throughout the United Kingdom.

S4C

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he has taken to ensure political balance on the Board of S4C. [66062]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* All public appointments for which my right hon. Friend is responsible are made on the basis of aptitude and merit, and not on the basis of political affiliation. Under the Broadcasting Act 1990, S4C is required to ensure that due impartiality is preserved in respect of matters of political controversy or relating to current public policy.

Television Licence (Pensioners)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to review the TV licence scheme in respect of the different rates paid by different pensioners; and if he will make a statement. [66253]

Janet Anderson: The current review of BBC funding will include a detailed consideration of the structure of the concessionary television licence scheme and whether a suitable alternative structure could be available. The review panel will report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State by the end of July, after which we shall consult publicly on its findings.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Mr. Nick Mullen

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Attorney-General what were the main points of his submission made to the High Court concerning the seizure and arrest of Mr. Nick Mullen in Zimbabwe in 1989; and if he will place a copy of the submission in the Library. [65996]

The Attorney-General: Nicholas Mullen was convicted at the Central Criminal Court on 9 June 1990 of conspiracy to cause explosions and sentenced to 30 years imprisonment. He did not appeal against his conviction at that stage but, on 29 January 1998, obtained leave from the Court of Appeal to appeal against his conviction out of time. Although the consent of the then Attorney-General was required for the institution of the proceedings against Mullen, neither I nor my predecessors have been a party to the criminal proceedings which have been conducted by the Director of Public Prosecutions. There have been no proceedings in the High Court. The appeal is at present the subject of consideration by the Court of Appeal (Criminal Division) which has heard argument and reserved judgment. The transcripts of the trial may be obtained, in accordance with usual procedures, from the official shorthand writers. It would not be appropriate for me to make any further observations in relation to a case currently under consideration by the court.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Attorney-General what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66210]

The Attorney-General: Any contact between officials in my Department and people outside Government, including lobbyists, would be governed by the principles set out in the guidance issued by the Prime Minister in July 1998, as set out in the answer given by him on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

DEFENCE

Clyde Naval Base

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the total annual cost of providing harbour craft services, including those sub-contracted, at HM Naval Base Clyde. [66598]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Naval Bases and Supply Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Trewby to Mrs. Margaret Ewing, dated 20 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Defence has asked me to reply to your Question about the total annual cost of providing harbour craft services, including those sub-contracted, at HM Naval Base Clyde as this falls within my area of responsibility.

The provision of all the Marine Services at HM Naval Base Clyde is undertaken by a commercial contractor, Serco Denholm Ltd. I regret that I am unable to disclose the cost of these services as it is commercially sensitive.

Export Licences

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what military or dual use goods have been exported since 1 May 1997 under Government-to-Government deals without export licence. [66241]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* Since May 1997, the UK has exported the following equipment under the terms of government-to-government agreements with the Governments of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait:

Kuwait

Warrior vehicles, Starburst missiles and launchers, including spare parts; special tools and test equipment; technical publications; and general workshop tools.

Saudi Arabia

Tornado and Hawk aircraft; Minehunters with associated armaments; and support equipment, including spares.

Additionally, for disposals of surplus MOD equipment, the MOD Disposal Sales Agency requires overseas governments which purchase surplus MOD equipment to obtain a UK export licence before collection of equipment from the UK. There has been one exception to this practice since May 1997. This was in relation to the supply of three ex Royal Navy Peacock Class patrol craft, which were delivered to the Philippine Government from their base in Hong Kong.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will re-assess the number of TA centres to remain open in South Lancashire. [65028]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I am content that our decision that all TA Centres in Lancashire, bar Chorley, should remain open, was sound.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what account he took of the proportion of the strength of the TA which will remain after implementation of the Strategic Defence Review in *(a)* the North West of England and *(b)* North Wales, in his decision to transfer HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry. [65024]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The regional distribution of reductions in the TA was one of a number of factors taken into account in reaching decisions on the future TA structure, but, in view of the small numbers involved in this case, was not a major factor in the decision to transfer Headquarters 101 Battalion REME to Queensferry.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many new full-time jobs will be created in Queensferry as a consequence of the transfer of HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry. [65026]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This will depend on staffing arrangements that have yet to be confirmed.

Ships

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast service life for *(a)* Project Horizon and *(b)* Type 22 ships. [65729]

Mr. Spellar: The planned service life for the Common New Generation Frigate (CNGF) is a minimum of 25 years. The reduction in the size of our destroyer and frigate force from 35 to 32, as announced in the Strategic Defence Review White Paper, will be achieved by paying off the Type 22 frigates HMS Boxer, Beaver and London in 1999. HMS Brave will be replaced by a new Type 23 frigate in 2000 as will HMS Coventry in 2001. The remaining five Type 22 frigates have a planned service life of approximately 23 years.

Rosyth

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how frequently radiation surveys are undertaken at the entrance to reactor compartments during work on nuclear submarines at Rosyth dockyard; [65726]

(2) what proportion of supervisors in the Health Physics Section at Rosyth dockyard are qualified to City & Guilds Part 1 Radiation and Safety Practice standards; [65727]

(3) what instruments are used to monitor personnel leaving the reactor compartments of nuclear submarines at Rosyth dockyard. [65737]

Mr. Spellar: All nuclear safety issues relating to Rosyth Royal Dockyard are a matter for Babcock Rosyth Defence Limited, the owners of the Dockyard. It is a condition of their contract with the MOD that they must comply with all nuclear safety regulations.

Submarines

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast hull life of the *(a)* Astute and *(b)* Vanguard class of submarines. [65738]

Mr. Spellar: On current plans, both classes have an estimated hull life of 25 years.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the anticipated reactor life of the *(a)* Astute and *(b)* Swiftsure class of submarines. [65741]

Mr. Spellar: The reactor plant to be fitted to the Astute class, and reactor plant fitted to the Swiftsure class, are anticipated to last the life of the submarines.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the displacement of the *(a)* Swiftsure and *(b)* Trafalgar class of submarines. [65740]

Mr. Spellar: The displacement of Swiftsure submarines, when submerged, is approximately 4,980 tons and of Trafalgar Class submarines, about 5,050 tons.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast reactor life of the Trafalgar class of submarines. [66173]

Mr. Spellar: The reactor plant fitted to the Trafalgar class is designed to last the life of the submarines.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast hull life of the Swiftsure class of submarines. [66166]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The initial design life of Swiftsure class submarine hulls was 25 years, although there is sufficient margin to extend the life of the submarines as necessary, subject to monitoring to ensure the continuing safety of the submarines.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the anticipated reactor life of the Vanguard class of submarines. [66668]

Mr. Spellar: The reactor plant fitted to the Vanguard class is designed to last the life of the submarines.

Young Service Personnel (Disciplinary Proceedings)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel under 18 years of age have been court-martialled in the last 10 years. [66223]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The information we have available covers the period 1987–1996. Within that period, a total of 19 personnel under the age of 18 years have been convicted by a court-martial. In addition, two RN personnel convicted by a court-martial were charged when under 18 but had reached the age of 18 by the date of their trial.

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel under 18 years of age are currently detained for breaches of contract or discipline at the Military Correctional Training Centre, Colchester. [66222]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Only one solider under the age of 18 years is currently being held at the Military Corrective Training Centre, Colchester. That soldier is nearing the end of his period of detention following a sentence of 60 days for being Absent Without Leave.

RN Base Faslane

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what instruments are used to monitor personnel leaving the reactor compartments of nuclear submarines at RN Base Faslane. [66176]

Mr. Spellar: Personnel leaving the reactor compartment of a nuclear submarine at HM Naval Base Clyde are monitored with an NE Technology Mk10 ratemeter connected to either a BP4 of BP10 probe.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how frequently radiation surveys are undertaken at the entrance to reactor compartments during work on nuclear submarines at RN Base Faslane. [66174]

Mr. Spellar: Radiation surveys of the reactor compartment are carried out daily while work is being undertaken. This includes all compartment entrances and the tunnel area. In addition, other more localised radiation surveys are performed in the vicinity of work areas.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of supervisors in the Health Physics Section at RN Base Faslane are qualified to City and Guilds Part 1 Radiation and Safety Practice standards. [66175]

Mr. Spellar: All supervisors working within the Health Physics Group at HM Naval Base Clyde are qualified to both City and Guilds Part 1 and 2 in Radiation and Safety Practice standards.

Harrier Aircraft

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast service life of Harrier GR7 aircraft engines. [66160]

Mr. Spellar: The Harrier GR7 aircraft entered RAF service in 1987. On current plans, the Harrier GR7 fleet, including the engines, will achieve a service life of some 30 years.

The Harrier GR7 is fitted with the Pegasus Mark 105 engine. Each of the engine's component parts has an approved life and may be replaced during the life of the whole engine in accordance with established maintenance policy.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many technical support personnel are required to support the deployment away from existing RAF bases of flights of *(a)* four and *(b)* eight RAF Harrier aircraft. [66669]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The number of technical support personnel deployed to support four or eight RAF Harrier aircraft is dependent on several factors, including the operational requirements, the flying task, the number of hours to be worked in any one day and the amount of support available from the Host Nation. However, a flight of four or eight aircraft would be likely to generate a minimum of 79 and 128 technical support personnel respectively.

Type 23 Ships

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast service life for Type 23 ships. [66168]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The forecast service life for Type 23 frigates is in excess of 18 years and varies for individual vessels in the class.

Tornado GR4 Aircraft

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast service life of Tornado GR4 aircraft airframes. [66170]

Mr. Spellar: The Tornado GR4 entered RAF service in 1997. On current plans, the Tornado GR4 fleet will achieve a service life of some 25 years.

Christmas Island Nuclear Tests

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will state his policy in respect of the application by Fijian veterans for compensation for the effects on their health of their exposure to atmospheric nuclear tests on Christmas Island. [66428]

Mr. Spellar: My Department has not received any claims for compensation from Fijian veterans. At the time of the tests, precautions were taken to safeguard the health of those in the area. The effectiveness of these precautions is borne out by independent studies of the health of British nuclear test veterans undertaken by the National Radiological Protection Board and Imperial Cancer Research Fund, which found no evidence of excessive illness or mortality among the veterans as a group which could be linked to their participation in the tests or to exposure to radiation as a result of the tests.

Vessel Running Costs

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are *(a)* the running costs averaged over a four year period, excluding costs attributable to refits, DEDs, or manning and *(b)* the current estimates for an average refit and DED of a (i) Type 23 frigate, (ii) Type 22 (Batch 3) frigate, (iii) Sandown class SRMH, (iv) Hunt Class MCMV, (v) Island Class patrol vessel, (vi) Archer Class training vessel, (vii) Castle Class patrol vessel, (viii) Landing Ship-Logistic (LSL), (ix) Bulldog Class survey vessel, (x) Projected CNGF, (xi) Impulse Class tug and (xii) (ARMY) ramped landing craft. [66597]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Type 42 Ships

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the average time between major refits for Type 42 ships. [66169]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Typically, the average time between major refits for RN Frigates and Destroyers is in excess of seven years.

HMS Illustrious

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the interval between major refits for HMS Illustrious. [66167]

Mr. Doug Henderson: HMS Illustrious has undergone one refit. It took place some nine years after she entered service with the Royal Navy.

Nuclear Test Site (Nevada)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy to establish whether any plutonium that has recently migrated through the groundwater from the nuclear test site in Nevada came from the underground detonation of British nuclear warheads. [66432]

Mr. Spellar: No.

Submarines and Fishing Boats

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to write to the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde further to his statement in the House of 12 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 506. [66359]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I expect to write to my hon. Friend shortly. A copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Firing Ranges, Dartmoor

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the advertised days and actual number of days on which Army firing took place within each of the three firing ranges in the Dartmoor National Park for the year ended 31 December 1998. [66116]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The advertised and actual number of days on which Army firing took place within each of the three firing ranges in the Dartmoor National Park for the year ended 31 December 1998 is as follows:

	Advertised	*Actual*
Okehampton Range	77	51
Willsworthy Range	202	147
Merrivale Range	150	84

El Shifa Factory, Khartoum

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make available the independent evidence which he stated the UK had that the El Shifa factory in Khartoum was making chemical or biological weapons before the US air strike. [65661]

Mr. George Robertson: I am withholding details of the intelligence in our possession regarding the El Shifa factory, under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice for Access to Government Information.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

National Biotechnology Conference

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will produce a response to the National Biotechnology Conference held in March 1997. [64965]

Mr. Meacher: The Government response to the National Biotechnology Conference is available today. The Government have undertaken to examine ways of making more information available to the public about how decisions on biotechnology applications are reached; to ensure that membership of the Advisory Committees reflects a wide range of opinion; to address the wider implications for the natural environment of the introduction of genetically modified crops and to establish procedures for monitoring products when they enter the market. Copies of the response have been placed in the Library.

Waste Oils

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the latest draft of the proposed Used Oil Directive; [65894]

(2) how much of the waste oils produced in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* the European Union are (i) recovered and recycled and (ii) burnt as fuel, as (1) a quantity and (2) a percentage in each case; [65893]

(3) what assessment he has made of the environmental impact of burning waste oil; [65891]

(4) what assessment he has made of the potential for recycling waste oils. [65892]

Mr. Meale: No reliable, recent figures of waste oil recovery and recycling are available for the United Kingdom. My officials have confirmed with the European Commission that no recent figures have been published for the European Union. The United Kingdom, along with other EU member states, is currently compiling information on waste oil for the European Commission. It is understood that the consolidated report will be available from the Commission at the end of June.

My Department has not carried out any recent studies of the environmental impact of burning waste oils. However, in carrying out its regulatory functions under the Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, the Environment Agency assesses applications according to the statutory requirements of Best Practicable Environmental Option (BPEO) and Best Available Technique Not Entailing Excessive Cost (BATNEEC) as defined in Part 1 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. On the basis of environmental analyses of the small number of cases involving waste oils, the Agency has concluded that this process did not adversely affect the environment.

My officials have confirmed with the European Commission that no draft of the proposed Used Oil Directive has been issued.

At this stage, no assessment has been made of the potential for recycling waste oils.

Environmental Management

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures his Department is taking to promote the uptake of the environmental management systems ISO14001 and Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS). [66626]

Mr. Meale: The Government fully support and promote the use of environmental management systems and promote the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) alongside the international standard for environmental management systems (ISO 14001) as complementary means for business to continuously improve performance.

My Department has produced and made available free of charge a full range of introductory leaflets, guides, case study material and videos to encourage business and local authorities to participate in EMAS. These are now all available from the Institute of Environmental Assessment, who I appointed last year to succeed my Department in administering the scheme. EMAS and ISO 14001 are both promoted by my Department and by the IEA at exhibitions and conferences. We are also funding separate promotional efforts by the IEA which is planning to establish a dedicated EMAS website.

My Department is currently working with the Transport and General Workers Union on an EMAS Handbook to help all employees to understand and implement environmental management systems. Last November we set up a new environment and energy helpline to provide guidance for small and medium firms on how good environmental performance can help their businesses.

EMAS and ISO 14001 were also featured in the Government's recent consultation paper on "Sustainable Business", part of the wider consultation on sustainable development. My Department has been fully involved in the current revision of the EMAS Regulation and in pressing for changes, including the incorporation of key elements of ISO 14001, to further enhance its attractiveness to business. Seeking views from business and other interested parties about the proposed changes has provided a further opportunity to raise awareness of EMAS and indirectly of ISO 14001.

Solar Design

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action his Department is taking to improve the passive solar design of buildings; and if he will make a statement. [66621]

Mr. Meale: Under my Department's Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme we promote the application of passive solar design principles alongside energy efficiency measures as part of an integrated approach to low energy building design. Also, we encourage the consideration of passive solar design in specific buildings through Design Advice Services operated by BRECSU under the same programme.

Waste Water Treatment

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will announce the date by which secondary treatment of waste water and sewage will be required under the terms of the European Union's Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive; and if he will make a statement. [66349]

Mr. Meale: Under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, secondary treatment must be provided by 31 December 2000 for sewage discharges above 15,000 population equivalent to inland, estuarial and coastal waters. Discharges to inland and estuarial waters of between 2,000 and 15,000 population equivalent, and discharges of between 10,000 and 15,000 population equivalent to coastal waters must receive secondary treatment by 31 December 2005.

In the case of coastal discharges which were formerly potentially subject to derogations to a lower level of treatment, we are encouraging water and sewerage companies to make as rapid a progress as possible with the installation of secondary treatment.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *246*, if he will place in the Library details of the current millennium compliance status of the organisations currently approved by the CAA; what percentage of these are fully millennium-compliant; and if he will make a statement. [66646]

Dr. Reid: No. It is not possible to provide information in this detail. The Civil Aviation Authority currently authorises over 2,000 aviation related organisations. These organisations cover all aspects of the UK civil air transport system form airlines to manufacturers and air traffic service providers. All these organisations are engaged in their own individual compliance programmes which involves them in each checking with suppliers who may number from tens to hundreds. These compliance programmes are being assessed by the CAA. Once this assessment is complete, which is expected to be during the third quarter of 1999, the CAA will make a statement about the Y2k readiness of the UK civil air transport system.

As far as National Air Traffic Services (NATS) are concerned, they are in the final stages of their system compliance programme. Only 10 systems out of a total of 700 still require remedial work and NATS expects to reach full systems ready status for the new millennium on or before the end of March 1999.

Mobile Homes

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what planning guidance he has issued in relation to mobile homes, with particular regard to all-year round occupancy; and if he will make a statement. [66254]

Mr. Raynsford: Planning Policy Guidance note 21 on Tourism gives guidance on holiday and touring caravans, including the seasonal and holiday occupancy conditions.

Parish Councils

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with parish councils regarding the impact of the increased audit requirements and subsequent costs on smaller parish councils; and if he will make a statement. [66261]

Ms Armstrong: The Chairman of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and his colleagues discussed with me the cost of parish audits when I met them on 16 December. As I explained to them, it is essential for parish councils, as for all councils, to have an effective audit regime ensuring propriety and regularity in their affairs. We have no plans to review the current parish audit arrangements, which were introduced in April 1997, although we do keep these matters under review.

Wild Birds Directive

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to incorporate directive 97/49/EU into UK law; and if he will make a statement. [66252]

Mr. Meale: No changes are required to UK law as a result of Directive 97/49/EC.

Advance Corporation Tax

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funds he intends to make available *(a)* nationally, *(b)* to Gloucestershire County Council and *(c)* to Tewkesbury Borough Council to compensate for the removal of ACT credit in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [66255]

Ms Armstrong: In the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 1999–2000, the Government specifically took account of the best estimate of £130 million available to them and the Local Government Association to provide for the effects of the abolition of ACT on the local government pension scheme.

It is not possible to identify how much has been provided at a local level. Local authorities receive Revenue Support Grant (RSG) on the basis of their Standard Spending Assessment (SSA). SSAs are calculated using information reflecting the demographic, physical and social characteristics of each area and are intended to reflect the relative costs of providing comparable services between different authorities. RSG makes up the difference between an authority's SSA and the income it can expect to receive from both re-distributed non-domestic rates and from a standard council tax. RSG is not hypothecated to particular services or for particular purposes.

Dial-a-bus Services

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations he has received concerning the extension of fuel duty rebate to dial-a-bus services; what assistance is currently available to *(a)* rural and *(b)* urban dial-a-bus services; and if he will make a statement; [66606]

(2) what plans he has to extend the eligibility criteria for fuel duty rebate to dial-a-bus services. [66605]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have no present plans to extend the eligibility of bus fuel duty rebate beyond those services which (amongst other criteria) are available to the general public and are registered with the Traffic Commissioner as a local bus service.

We have received a number of representations on this matter, which has also been recently raised in the review of voluntary transport that my Department commissioned last year. We expect to receive the report on that review shortly and will be considering its recommendations carefully.

Support for both urban and rural dial-a-bus services is primarily a matter for each local authority to decide in the light of its overall spending priorities and the resources available to it. Additional support for specific rural community transport projects, including dial-a-bus services, is available as part of the Government's new funding for rural transport, announced in the last Budget, of £50 million a year, of which Scotland's share is £4.5 million a year.

London Transport

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made with his proposed restructuring of the Board of London Transport. [67091]

Mr. Prescott: I have today appointed Sir Malcolm Bates as non-executive Chairman of London Transport. He will take up his post on 15 February. This appointment is excellent news for London Transport. With Denis Tunnicliffe as Chief Executive and Derek Smith taking up post shortly as Managing Director of London Underground, we have now given LT the senior management structure it needs to address the challenging agenda we have set.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disabled People

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set up a national information service on equipment for people with disabilities. [65433]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

The Department is providing funding to the Disabled Living Foundation and the Royal National Institute for the Blind to help them improve their databases on disability equipment and transfer these to the Internet. The Disabled Living Foundation also operates a telephone helpline for disabled people.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has for a disablement services authority with a brief to set standards and monitor the standard of equipment provision for people with disabilities. [65434]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

We have no plans to develop proposals on a disablement services authority at present. However we are examining a range of mechanisms to help ensure consistent access to services and quality of care.

Employees

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate, on the basis of the Family Resources Survey, and pooling years of data, the number of benefit units which contain at least one employee whose net earnings is in each £5,000 band up to £30,000 and above, indicating separately the figures for (i) lone parent families, (ii) two parent families with one child, (iii) two parent families with two children and (iv) two parent families with three or more children, providing within each category separate figures for those in *(a)* firms of up to 25 employees and *(b)* firms of 25 employees or more. [64780]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Number of two parent family benefit units with at least one employee by number of dependent children and number of employees in the local unit of the firm by which they are employed (excluding those benefit units where at least one member is either full or part-time self-employed—Average of period 1994–95 to 1996–97

Thousand

Number of dependent children	*Number of employees in local unit*	*Number of benefit units by net earnings bands*						
		0–5	*5–10*	*10–15*	*15–20*	*20–25*	*25–30*	*30+*
One	1–24	30	50	90	100	65	35	40
	25+	20	80	180	265	205	130	180
Two	1–24	30	50	95	105	60	40	50
	25+	25	65	210	300	270	150	225
Three or more	1–24	20	25	40	35	20	15	15
	25+	15	40	80	100	70	50	60

Number of lone parent family benefit units where the head is an employee by the number of employees in the local unit of the firm by which they are employed (excluding those benefit units where at least one member is either full or part-time self-employed Average of period 1994–95 to 1996–97

Thousand

Number of employees in local unit	*Number of benefit units by net earnings bands*						
	0–5	*5–10*	*10–15*	*15–20*	*21–24*	*25–30*	*30+*
1–24	130	65	30	10	*	*	*
25+	90	110	70	30	10	*	*

Notes:

1. All figures are estimates and are taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data set based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS does not include Northern Ireland.
2. Only benefit units with at least one employee were considered when answering this question. Benefit units containing at least one person who was either fully or part-time self-employed were excluded.
3. The income bands in the tables relate to the total net earnings of the benefit unit as opposed to the individual.
4. The definition of employment used is: "whether the individual was employed and at work, or employed but away from work, in the last week".
5. Where both members of a couple are employed, the value taken for the number of employees in the local unit of the firm was that for the head of the benefit unit, unless they were not working, in which case that for the spouse was assumed instead.
6. The concept of the number of employees in the local unit of a firm used in answering this question is different from the usual definition of a small firm (ie the number of employees of the enterprise as a whole, across all local units) which is not available from the FRS. Given this fact, in conjunction with the use of the net earnings (as defined for HBAI) rather than assessable income (as defined for the proposed Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC)), it is advised that it would not be considered appropriate to use the data supplied in any analysis of the administration of the WFTC. The exclusion of all benefit units containing the self-employed would also have a bearing on this issue.
7. The figures given are rounded to the nearest 5,000 benefit units. The entries marked "*" have values of less than 2,000.
8. To provide more robust estimates at such a fine level of detail, the HBAI data set was pooled over three financial years, from April 1994—March 1997.
9. As the FRS does not actually collect annual earnings data from individuals, this figure was estimated from weekly earnings data. As the earnings data collected relates solely to the last pay-cheque received, it will not take into account any bonuses, pay-rises or changes of employment that may take/have taken place at other points in the year.
10. The earnings bands were taken to be in April 1998 prices, and all earnings data from each of the financial years used was uprated accordingly, to April 1998 prices, using the Retail Prices Index (RPI).

Widows

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what estimate he has made of the number of widows who will receive reduced benefit payments following the implementation of his reform proposals; [66352]

(2) what category of widows who submit their claims under the new rules will receive reduced benefit under his reform proposals. [66262]

Angela Eagle: Following implementation of the proposals, widows and widowers aged over 45 when they are widowed and who are not entitled to Widowed Parent's Allowance will be able to claim Bereavement Allowance, which will be payable for up to six months.

In the first full year following implementation, it is estimated that, at any one time, the average number of widows and widowers entitled to the Bereavement Allowance, which will end after 6 months, will be 20,000.

Notes:

1. Numbers of widows and widowers have been supplied by the Government Actuary's Department.
2. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 10,000.
3. These estimates are intended to represent broad orders of magnitude.

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the effect would be of an immediate increase in the age addition to the basic state pension to *(a)* £5 for the over 80s, *(b)* £5 for the over 80s and £3 for

the over 75s and *(c)* £10 for the over 80s and £5 for the over 75s, on the number of pensioners receiving income support in (i) 1999–2000 and (ii) 2000–01. [65422]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Reduction in the number of pensioner benefit units receiving income support with the proposed age additions

	1999–2000	*2000–01*
£5 to 80+s	–40,000	–40,000
£3 to 75–79s, £5 to 80+s	–50,000	–60,000
£5 to 75–79s, £10 to over 80+s	–140,000	–160,000

Notes:

1. Estimates are based on the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey and the Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry.
2. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 10,000 and provide broad orders of magnitude.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the combined value of the basic pension and the proposed second state pension as a proportion of average earnings once the new scheme has fully matured, for someone with annual earnings of *(a)* £4,500, *(b)* £9,000, *(c)* £13,500, *(d)* £18,000 and *(e)* £22,500. [65426]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Combined value of basic state pension and state second pension as a proportion of national average earnings in retirement

Annual earnings (£)	*Percentage*
4,500	21
9,000	21
13,500	23
18,000	25
22,500	26

Notes:

1. Results are presented for a person who begins work at age 16 in 2002; earns the amounts specified (in 1998 earnings terms) throughout their working life; retires at age 65 in 2051.
2. Real average earnings are assumed to grow at 1.5 per cent. per annum.
3. 1998 national average earnings are taken from the New Earnings Survey 1998 as average gross weekly earnings for full-time employees on adult rates whose pay was not affected by absence during the survey pay-period.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is his policy on whether *(a)* lump sums paid as part of pensions on retirement and *(b)* capital sums held as part of approved personal plans before annuitisation will be subject under the minimum pensions guarantee to the savings limits and tariff income schedule regimes of existing income support; [66454]

(2) if the capital resources assessment rules accompanying the minimum pension guarantee have been decided; and which existing income support capital resources rules will be revised. [66455]

Mr. Timms: Initially, the rules governing the treatment of resources will remain unchanged. However, in "Partnership in Pensions" we made it clear that we will examine ways of amending the rules to reward better those who have saved for their retirement. We hope to bring forward proposals later in this Parliament.

Appeals Tribunals

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what consultation was conducted prior to introducing the change in the composition of social security appeals tribunals hearing all-work test appeals; and if he will make a statement; [65583]

(2) what is the reason for the recent review of the composition of social security appeals tribunals hearing all-work test appeals; [65582]

(3) how many representations his Department has received *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* in total on the review of the composition of social security appeals tribunals hearing all-work test appeals; and if he will make a statement. [65584]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) on 29 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *266*. The recent change to the composition of Social Security Appeal Tribunals (SSATs) hearing All Work Test Appeals was the second phase of measures introduced by His Honour Judge Harris, the President of the Independent Tribunal Services under transitory powers afforded to him by Schedule 6 of the Social Security Act 1998.

This provision was introduced to give the President flexibility over the composition of SSATs during a period of substantial change in 1999. The President wanted to be able to monitor the effect of change before regulations varying the composition of tribunals are debated in Parliament. The President consulted widely within his organisation. The decision to introduce the change is a judicial matter.

The President's initial monitoring of the changes indicates that the new flexibility appears to be working well. Tribunal Chairmen, operating the new arrangements, are reporting overall improvements in service as a result of the change. There is no evidence to suggest that the percentage of appeals upheld has been affected by the introduction of the new arrangements. The Department has not received any representations from appellants who have had their appeals decided by a legally qualified panel member supported by a medical assessor. These are initial results and monitoring is continuing.

We are firmly committed to tackling the unacceptable delays in the appeals service—currently averaging seven months, with some appellants waiting over a year for the decision on their case. The flexibility to tailor the composition and expertise of the Tribunal to the issues raised by an appeal will provide appellants with good quality decisions, quicker.

Regulations varying tribunal composition under Section 7 of the Social Security Act 1998 will be debated shortly under affirmative procedures. Draft regulations are being discussed with the Independent Tribunal Service, the Council of Tribunals, the Office of the Social Security Commissioners and an ad hoc group of representative bodies including the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Child Poverty Action Group.

Lone Parents

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each quarter since May 1997

the number of lone parents claiming income support; and if he will estimate the number of lone parents who will be claiming income support for each of the next four quarters. [65767]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

	Number
Published[1]	
May 1997	1,014,000
August 1997	1,012,000
November 1997	982,000
February 1998	972,000
May 1998	961,000
Forecast[2]	
August 1998	957,000
November 1998	933,000
February 1999	927,000
May 1999	918,000
August 1999	919,000
November 1999	895,000

[1] Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error.

[2] Figures are consistent with forecasts produced for the pre-budget report and are estimates of the number of lone parents that will be shown in future quarterly Statistical Enquiries.

Note:

Lone parents are defined as those single people with dependants who are not in receipt of a disability or pensioner premium. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Prepayment Gas Meters

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the percentage of people receiving income support who pay their gas costs with prepayment meters. [65969]

Angela Eagle: We estimate that 24 per cent. of households receiving Income Support pay for gas with prepayment meters.

Notes:

1. This figure is an estimate taken from the 1997–98 Family Expenditure Survey for Great Britain.

2. This estimate will include households who do not use gas at all.

3. "Households receiving Income Support" means that the household contains at least one person receiving Income Support.

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to amend the Social Security (Overlapping Benefits) Regulations 1979 to mitigate their impact on recipients of invalid care allowance who lose their benefit on reaching retirement age. [66351]

Mr. Bayley: It is a basic principle of the Social Security system that only one benefit at a time can be paid for income maintenance. Retirement Pension is an income replacement benefit for those who have reached pensionable age. It replaces Invalid Care Allowance at pension age. Invalid Care Allowance provides a measure of financial support to those who give up the opportunity of full-time paid employment to care for a severely disabled person. It is not an "extra-costs" benefit. To pay both benefits in full therefore would duplicate provision for the same need. There are no plans to change these arrangements.

Benefits Agency (Computers)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how the £7 billion project for computers in the Benefits Agency is to be phased; what payback period is expected; and if he will make a statement. [66251]

Mr. Timms: The ACCORD project, announced on 5 November 1998, will deliver the next generation of computer systems fit to support a modernised Welfare State.

The Department is currently working with the preferred supplier, Affinity, on the development of a plan for the implementation of new Information Systems/Information Technology (IS/IT) which is expected to start with delivery of systems for Income Support and Child Support early in 2001. Negotiations on the costs of the new service have not yet been concluded.

Industrial Injuries Scheme

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he plans to have with relevant representative groups about the future of the industrial injuries scheme. [67200]

Mr. Darling: As part of our wider programme of Welfare Reform, we have been examining the scope for modernisation of the Industrial Injuries scheme. The scheme provides no-fault compensation benefits for those injured at, or suffering a disease caused by work, and was designed over 50 years ago for a very different social and industrial climate.

The Government's aim is to provide better protection from the risks and consequences of occupational disablement for the workforce of the future. We have asked officials to explore with the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, industry, trades unions and other key representative groups whether there are alternative replacement no-fault compensation arrangements which would meet those objectives.

WALES

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate his Department has made of the number of young people against whom sanctions have been taken for failure to comply with the New Deal. [64745]

Mr. Hain: Up until the end of October 1998, out of a total of some 12,000 young people who entered the New Deal Gateway in Wales, 95 young people have been sanctioned because, without good cause, they failed or refused to start a New Deal option or left an option early, or because they were dismissed from a New Deal option due to misconduct.

Bus Services

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives he is taking to improve bus services in *(a)* urban and *(b)* rural areas, with particular reference to Flintshire. [66410]

Mr. Hain: For 1999–2000, I am making £5 million available to local authorities to support local bus services, of which at least £3 million must be spent on rural services with the remainder for urban services. This grant is in addition to the provision which local authorities make in their own budgets for subsidised services. All authorities in Wales, including Flintshire, will receive a share of this money. I am currently consulting on the precise method of allocating funds to authorities, and will announce the individual allocations shortly.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he proposes to help senior citizens to use buses; and if he will make a statement. [66419]

Mr. Hain: From April, I expect all local authorities in Wales to be operating concessionary travel schemes for pensioners which at least meet the Government's proposed minimum standard of a maximum of £5 for a bus pass and a minimum discount of 50 per cent. on bus fares. In addition, I have announced that we intend to provide free concessionary bus travel for pensioners over the next two to three years.

Combined Heat and Power

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his policy concerning the building of combined heat and power stations. [66409]

Mr. Hain: As in the recent consent approved for Shotton, combined heat and power projects can offer environmental benefits and should play an important role in ensuring the availability of sustainable energy supplies. Full details of the Government's policy on building such schemes, in England and Wales, is set out in the White Paper (Cm 4071) entitled "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation", which was published on 8 October 1998.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set up an inquiry into the impact of private medical practice on NHS waiting lists under the terms recommended by the Health Committee. [63259]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* We have no plans to set up an inquiry of the sort recommended by the Health Select Committee 8 years ago.

Live Births

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list, for each of the last 10 years, the total number of live births in the United Kingdom, and the percentage of those births delivered by caesarean section. [66264]

Mr. Hutton: The information currently available on the number of live births and the percentage of births delivered by caesarean section is shown in the tables.

Total number of live births occurring to women resident in England 1988–97

Year	*Number*
1988	654,363
1989	649,357
1990	666,920
1991	660,806
1992	651,784
1993	636,473
1994	628,956
1995	613,257
1996	614,184
1997	607,216

Source:
Office for National Statistics

Percentage of deliveries by caesarean section in England 1988–97

Financial year	*Percentage of deliveries by caesarean section*
1988–89	[1]—
1989–90	11.3
1990–91	12.4
1991–92	12.9
1992–93	13.8
1993–94	15.0
1994–95	15.5
1995–96	[2]16
1996–97	[2]17

[1] Information not available
[2] Provisional
Source:
Department of Health

Questions relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales, for Scotland and for Northern Ireland respectively.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the establishment of a national screening programme for prostate cancer; and if he will make a statement. [65820]

Mr. Hutton: We have received no such representations. In response to advice from the National Screening Committee (NSC), we advised the National Health Service in Executive Letter (97)12 that screening for prostate cancer should not be offered routinely, based on the existing evidence available. This remains the current policy. The NSC is actively keeping this question under review in the light of emerging evidence.

Medical Schools

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when his implementation group will invite bids from *(a)* established medical schools, *(b)* new medical schools and *(c)* others for provision of 1,000 additional doctors' training places; and if he will make a statement; [66087]

(2) what are the criteria recommended by the joint Department of Health and Higher Education Funding Council for England implementation group, for awarding 1,000 additional medical school places to existing medical schools, new medical schools or new models for doctor training; and if he will make a statement. [66088]

Mr. Denham: The Joint Implementation Group, which has been established to oversee the allocation of universities of the English share of the increase in medical school places, wrote to all English Universities and their National Health Service partners on 8 January 1999, inviting them to submit proposals for the admission of the additional medical students in the years 2000 to 2005. It is open to universities to make proposals, whether or not they already have medical schools. Copies of the 8 January letter are available in the Library.

The invitation set out the objectives and criteria established by the Group, which will be used when considering universities' proposals. The objectives are:

To develop new doctors who are equipped to meet the challenge of changing health and health care needs of patients and populations into the first half of the 21st Century;

To develop new doctors who are able to practise to a very high standard, through being able to appraise and use evidence, to become life-long learners, to maintain professional standards and to be effective team members and leaders;

To develop new doctors who are committed to and skilled in promoting health, preventing ill health, diagnosing and treating injury and disease and caring for people with long term illness and disability;

To develop new doctors who understand the value of partnership and communication, both with their patients, their colleagues, and with members of other professional groups;

To provide a high quality educational experience in an environment in which evaluation and research are fostered and which gives value for money;

To demonstrate an active commitment to the admission of students from a broad range of social and ethnic backgrounds, to reflect the patterns of populations which are served by the NHS;

To ensure that the distribution and patterns of training of students effectively increase the home supply of doctors, and meet the needs of the populations which are served by the NHS;

To enhance quality and value for money through collaboration between universities and partnership with the NHS.

Allergies

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for research into the causes and treatment of allergies; and if he will make a statement. [66258]

Ms Jowell: The Department's policy research programme and the National Health Service research and development programmes are supporting a range of research on allergies and will continue to do so. The Medical Research Council, the main agency through which the Government support biomedical and clinical research, which receives its grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology in the Department of Trade and Industry, is also funding relevant research, including the study of infections, immunity and inflammations, which will underpin work on allergies.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the number of people in each decile of *(a)* benefit unit income and *(b)* household income, who will gain from the introduction of the working families tax credit. [65421]

Dawn Primarolo: The table shows the estimated numbers gaining from the introduction of Working Families Tax Credit for those eligible for the credit. Overall, about 1 million benefit units will gain.

Number of gainers from introduction of Working Families Tax Credit

Decile	*Benefit unit income*	*Household income*
Lowest	[1]—	120,000
2nd	250,000	380,000
3rd	410,000	260,000
4th	210,000	110,000
5th	90,000	70,000
6th	30,000	[1]—
7th	[1]—	[1]—
8th	[1]—	[1]—
9th	[1]—	[1]—
Highest	[1]—	[1]—

[1] No gainers or number of gainers too few to calculate reliable estimates.

Note:
Deciles are defined in terms of equivalised income on a benefit unit and household income basis using the McClements scale; decile boundaries are higher for households than benefit units.

Source:
These estimates have been derived from projections of Family Expenditure Survey data to 1999–2000.

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many household incomes of families in Doncaster, Central will rise as a result of the introduction of the working families tax credit. [66565]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that estimates for individual constituencies are not available.

Expenditure Allocation

Mr. Watts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what were the percentage changes in the share of the allocation of identifiable general expenditure per head between the English regions, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland over the last 10 years; [65589]

(2) what were the percentage changes in allocation of identifiable general expenditure per head between the English regions over the last 10 years. [65590]

Mr. Milburn: Tables containing a breakdown by region of General Government Expenditure (GGE) per capita have been published annually with effect from 1987–88. Figures for 1987–88 to 1990–91 are available in the Appendices of the *Statistical Supplement to the Autumn Statement* of 1990 to 1992; figures for 1991–92 to 1993–94 in Chapter 7 of *Public Expenditure: Statistical Supplement to the Financial Statement and Budget Report* for 1994–95 to 1996–97; and for 1994–95 to 1995–96 in Chapter 7 of the last two editions of *Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses* (PESA). A regional breakdown for 1996–97 will be published in PESA 1999–2000. Figures for GGE per capita in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland appear in the same Chapters as the regional figures, and figures for 1996–97 can be found in PESA 1998–99 (Cm 3901), which was published in April last year.

Identifiable expenditure in England cannot be fully apportioned between the English regions and it is therefore not possible to compare directly spending in the English regions with spending in England as a whole, or with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Changes in methodology mean that figures may not be directly comparable across different years.

Departmental Public Service Agreements

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what public consultation took place before setting the objectives and targets detailed in the departmental public service agreements; and if he will make a statement. [65709]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Government were elected on specific manifesto commitments which are reflected in the objectives and targets in the Public Service Agreements (PSAs). Departmental PSAs take account of consultation on a range of issues which has taken place since the Government were elected.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy to create an independent auditing process for the targets contained in the departmental public service agreements; and if he will make a statement. [65708]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Government will report annually on progress against targets in the Public Service Agreements and each department will publish further details in its departmental report. This will allow Parliament and the public to judge independently what progress has been made.

Government Spending Plans

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to announce the new Government spending plans for the years beyond 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [65711]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Departments' multi-year expenditure limits will be rolled forward for the next three financial years in 2000, as set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper.

Income Tax (10p Rate)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy to introduce a 10p starter rate of income tax within the current Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [65710]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* As the Chancellor made clear in his statement on the pre-Budget report, on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 681–792, the Government will introduce a 10p starting rate of income tax when it is economically right to do so.

Video Rentals

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the yield from levying a 10p tax on each rental of a video cassette. [66099]

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to introduce a new tax on the rental of video cassettes; [66194]

(2) what estimates he has made of the annual contribution to public funds of a tax on rented video cassettes of *(a)* 5p, *(b)* 10p, *(c)* 15p and *(d)* 20p. [66195]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* No such estimates have been made.

Miller Dywidag Joint Venture

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if Miller Dywidag Joint Venture is registered for the purposes of VAT. [66338]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Under provisions of the Finance Act 1989 and the Official Secrets Act 1989, we are prohibited from disclosing personal information from the VAT register without the permission of the taxpayer unless it can be demonstrated that it is in the public interest to do so. If the hon. Member would like to provide details of the reasons for his question, I shall consider whether there are grounds for disclosing this information to him.

Garage Labour (VAT)

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to apply VAT charged on garage labour for insurance repairs to insurance work carried out in garages which are owned by insurance companies; and if he will make a statement. [66385]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs are reviewing the VAT treatment of vehicle repairs carried out by motor insurers.

Electrical Contracting Industry

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the beneficial taxation concessions granted to the Joint Industry Board for Electrical Contracting Industry by the Inland Revenue and referred to in their explanatory notes and rules (May 1969). [66147]

Dawn Primarolo: I cannot comment on arrangements that the Joint Industry Board for Electrical Contracting Industry may have entered into with the Inland Revenue. They are confidential and a matter between the Board and the Inland Revenue.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66209]

Mr. Hoon: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply the Prime Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 4.

Legal Advisers

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department for what reason the age of 40 years was decided upon as the minimum age for current legal advisers in magistrates courts to be exempt from the requirements of the Justices' Clerks (Qualification of Assistants) (Amendment) Rules 1998; and if he will similarly exempt all postholders, irrespective of age. [66120]

Mr. Hoon: The decision to exempt those people who are aged 40 or older strikes the right balance between the important aim of a fully professionally qualified service and the practical difficulties faced by some individuals. Considerable thought was given to the question of whether all existing court clerks should be exempted, but it was decided that this was not a reasonable option. Some of these clerks are in their early to mid-20s and can be expected to work until they are in their mid-50s. It was felt that such a long term timescale before all clerks were professionally qualified did not match the timescale for modernising the magistrates courts to meet the challenges emerging now and in the future.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Data Protection

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to ensure that all reasonable steps are being taken by the security service to ensure that, when processing personal data for the purpose of assisting the police, the data are processed in a way compatible with section 29 of the Data Protection Act 1998. [65980]

Mr. Straw: The Director of the Security Service is under a statutory duty to ensure that no information is obtained by the Service except so far as necessary for the proper discharge of its functions, including supporting the activities of police forces and other law enforcement agencies in the prevention and detection of serious crime. We have already announced that, in line with existing policy, all personal data held by the Security Service is subject to exemption under section 28 of the 1998 Act. We do not envisage any circumstances in which it would be necessary to rely upon the exemption provisions in section 29.

Home Affairs Council (Terrorist Threats)

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the latest six monthly report on terrorist threats to EU member states discussed at the Home Affairs Council on 3 and 4 December; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [66143]

Mr. Straw: No. Article 4 of the relevant Council decision provides that

"access to a Council document shall not be granted where its disclosure could undermine the protection of the public interest, public security, international relations, monetary stability, court proceedings, inspections and investigations". I am satisfied accordingly that the Terrorism Threat Assessment Document should not be released.

Europol

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the proposed role of Europol in the establishment of Economic and Monetary Union, pursuant to the ECOFIN meeting of 19 May. [66140]

Kate Hoey: The ECONFIN Council meeting on 19 May 1998 concluded that a database and information system for the storage and exchange of law enforcement data on counterfeiting the Euro might need to be established. We take the view that Europol should be responsible for any such database. The issue remains under discussion with our European partners.

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the nature of United Kingdom participation in Europol's work programme for 1999, as established at the Home Affairs Councils of 3 and 4 December. [66138]

Kate Hoey: In 1999, the United Kingdom will contribute fully to all aspects of Europol's work in accordance with the Europol Convention. The United Kingdom will also continue to take a full part in monitoring, managing and developing the organisation through the Justice and Home Affairs Council, the Europol Management Board and other relevant bodies.

Gaming Act 1968

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will announce his response to the consultation on modernisation of the Gaming Act 1968. [66370]

Mr. George Howarth: We have been discussing specific issues with the Gaming Board and the industry, and hope to make an announcement shortly.

Illegal Lotteries

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of prosecutions in each of the last four years for which figures are available for alleged illegal operation of lotteries licensed under the Lotteries and Amusements Act 1976; and what, for each successful prosecution, was the fine or sentence imposed and the names of those convicted. [66266]

Mr. George Howarth: The table sets out the information we have from court reports. We do not collect the names of those convicted.

Number of defendants prosecuted at magistrates' courts and convicted at all courts for lottery offences under sections 2, 3, 4, 13 and 14 of the Lotteries and Amusements Act 1976 England and Wales

Offences/disposal	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Prosecutions	23	16	7	7
Convictions	13	11	4	4
of which were sentenced to:				
Absolute discharge	—	3	—	—
Conditional discharge	4	3	2	3
Fine	9	5	2	—
Average fine (£)	114	460	3,000	—
Highest recorded fine (£)	400	1,000	3,500	—
Probation Order	—	—	—	1

Video Classification

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will make any changes to the authority responsible for making arrangements for the classification of video works under the Video Recordings Act 1984; and if he will make a statement. [66999]

Mr. Straw: Following the proposal for designation which I laid before Parliament on 12 November 1998, I have today designated Lord Taylor of Warwick and Ms Janet Lewis Jones under section 4(4) of the Video Recordings Act 1984. Lord Taylor and Janet Lewis Jones were appointed as Vice Presidents designate of the British Board of Film Classification on 12 November 1998, and I am designating them, in that capacity, to replace Monica Sims.

I have placed in the Library a copy of my Notice of Designation and the text of letters I am sending to Lord Taylor and Janet Lewis Jones confirming the designation.

PRIME MINISTER

Franco-British Summit

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the consequences of the Franco-British summit at St. Malo on the development of a shared African policy particularly in relation to *(a)* intelligence matters, *(b)* the ethical foreign policy and *(c)* arms supplies to Governments-in-exile. [66341]

The Prime Minister: At St. Malo both Governments agreed to seek to harmonise their policies on Africa and pursue close co-operation on the ground; to promote the EU Common Position on Human Rights, Democratic Principles, the Rule of Law and Good Governance in Africa; and to attach particular importance to tackling problems of debt and the maintenance of a significant level of development assistance. We intend to follow this up by intensified exchange of diplomatic reporting and other diplomatic collaboration. There is no intention to develop a shared policy on any of the areas mentioned by the right hon. Member.

Cross-party Co-operation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the areas of co-operation with the Liberal Democrats through the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee system where he intends to use their contributions to develop policy. [65816]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Any contributions of the Liberal Democrats with the Joint Consultative Committee may be used in the development of policy, as may other contributions from a wide variety of sources.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to extend the remit of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee to involve *(a)* the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and *(b)* other Liberal Democrat right hon. and hon. Members in the development of Government policy on environmental issues. [66403]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The terms of reference of the Joint Consultative Committee are

"to consider policy issues of joint interest to the Government and the Liberal Democrats".

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed are currently reviewing the work of the Committee, including what policy areas might be discussed at the Committee in future. Their review is not yet complete.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what knowledge Her Majesty's Government have of the number of civilian casualties to which he referred in his letter to the hon. Member for Linlithgow of 13 January. [66492]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* As I said in my letter to my hon. Friend, the risk of civilian casualties was a major consideration in selecting targets during Operation Desert Fox. Only precision guided weapons were used where there was any risk of collateral damage. As I said, we regret any civilian injuries and deaths which may have occurred, but we are confident that these were minimal. There have been no reliable reports to the contrary.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what response he has made to the request by the Government of France on 22 December that Britain and the US should disclose the results of their attack against Iraq. [65649]

The Prime Minister: The Government have disclosed the results of military action against Iraq. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence sent a full report on the effects of Operation Desert Fox to all Members of the House on 22 December. An updated report will be issued shortly.

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what action was taken by himself, or with President Clinton, in response to the admission by a member of the UNSCOM arms inspectors in Iraq that UNSCOM information was being passed to the Israeli Intelligence Service; [66002]

(2) when he was first informed that certain members or a member of the UNSCOM arms inspectors in Iraq were in touch with the Israeli Intelligence Service. [66003]

The Prime Minister: UNSCOM is entitled to seek information and advice from all possible sources in pursuit of its mandate to destroy Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability.

UNSCOM Executive Chairman Richard Butler has made clear that he has always insisted on all UNSCOM activity being carried out strictly in pursuit of its disarmament mandate, not the benefit of any individual member state.

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what sanctions would apply to Liberal Democrat Party members of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee considering foreign policy and defence and security issues who disclosed the contents of classified material. [66510]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* All members of the Joint Consultative Committee including the Liberal Democrat members are covered by the Official Secrets Act 1989 in respect of the Committee's work.

Honours Lists

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Prime Minister how many United Kingdom nominations his office received for New Year and Birthday Honours in 1998; and how many United Kingdom honours were awarded in *(a)* the 1998 Birthday List and *(b)* the 1999 New Year List. [65905]

The Prime Minister *[pursuant to his reply, 18 January 1999, c. 343]:* The second sentence contains a typographical error and should read:

"The number of awards in my Honours List covering the whole range of activities in the United Kingdom made at *(a)* Birthday 1998 was 976 and at *(b)* New Year 1999 was 983".

NORTHERN IRELAND

Joint Ministerial Councils

7. **Mr. Trimble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement about the relevance of joint ministerial councils and concordats for the new arrangements in Northern Ireland. [64861]

Mr. Paul Murphy: After Devolution, the Government and the new administrations in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff will need to work together very closely on a number of important issues. Some of this work will be set out in formal agreements—or, concordats—agreed by all concerned.

In addition, liaison and consultation will be achieved through the setting up of a Joint Ministerial Committee. These arrangements are purely within a UK context.

Health Policy

8. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions she has held on future health policy since publication of the Acheson report into inequalities in health. [64862]

14. **Ms Corston:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions she has had on future health policy since the publication of the Acheson report into inequalities in health. [64868]

Mr. McFall: I welcome Sir Donald's report. Under the new Targeting Social Need initiative, all Northern Ireland Departments are to produce Action Plans by the summer. These will address health and other inequalities. The Department of Health and Social Services has already initiated a process of consultation with relevant interests on the substance of its Action Plan. This will take into account Sir Donald's recommendations.

Women

9. **Ms Beverley Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she has set the Government's priorities in relation to policy for women in Northern Ireland. [64863]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government are putting in place a number of important policies, such as action on violence against women, childcare provision and family friendly employment.

Furthermore, our commitment to equality for everyone in society is a key part of the Good Friday Agreement.

I would also like to see more women from Northern Ireland in public life generally—in the Assembly and in this House.

Trade Links

10. **Mr. Home Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps are being taken to promote trade between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. [64864]

Mr. Ingram: The Industrial Development Board (IDB) and the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) organise and support company participation in GB trade exhibitions, meet the buyer events and other trade initiatives.

IDB, LEDU and the Northern Ireland Growth Challenge have been developing linkages between Northern Ireland suppliers and major GB and ROI purchasers.

Belfast (Economic Regeneration)

11. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made on the economic regeneration of Belfast. [64865]

Mr. Ingram: Good progress is being made. Unemployment rates have fallen—down 8.1 per cent. since October 1997. Major Laganside developments are clearly visible. 1998 has also seen 3 new hotels open in the city and investment announcements which include 5 new software companies and 3 new call centres.

Small Businesses

12. **Ms Southworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps she is taking to support the development of small businesses. [64866]

Mr. Ingram: LEDU (Local Enterprise Development Unit) is the Government Agency with responsibility for small business development in Northern Ireland. LEDU assists small businesses in Northern Ireland to become more competitive, by providing information, guidance and financial support.

With the 1998 Budget the Government made provision for considerable reductions on the regulatory and fiscal burdens on small firms, including the United Kingdom wide University Challenge Fund.

A major economic strategy aimed at promoting enterprise and encouraging investment throughout Northern Ireland was also announced by the Chancellor during May 1998.

Integrated Schools

13. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Northern Ireland how many integrated schools have been approved since 1997. [64867]

17. **Miss Melanie Johnson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many integrated schools have been approved since 1 May 1997. [64871]

Mr. McFall: Eight new integrated schools have been approved since May 1997—one new grant-maintained integrated secondary school and seven controlled integrated schools. Conditional approval has been granted to a further three schools from September 1999—Oakwood Primary School, Strangford College and Spires Primary School.

Social Security Fraud

15. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures she is taking to tackle social security fraud. [64869]

Mr. McFall: The Social Security Agency has instigated a comprehensive programme of initiatives based on risk assessment. It includes data matching across benefit systems, interviewing appropriate claimants both at initial claim stage and during the lifetime of claims, and closer working with other Agencies and Departments.

Decommissioning

16. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made on the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives; and if she will make a statement. [64870]

20. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made on the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives; and if she will make a statement. [64874]

24. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the decommissioning of terrorist weapons in Northern Ireland. [64878]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Members to the reply I gave earlier to the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), *Official Report*, column 896.

22. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish targets for the decommissioning of weapons during 1999. [64876]

Mr. Ingram: The Good Friday Agreement committed all the participants to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. The participants also confirmed their intention to continue to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission and to use any influence they may have to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms, within two years of the Referendum last May and in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement.

25. **Mr. Hawkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will stop the release of terrorist prisoners until the IRA decommission and surrender weapons and explosives. [64879]

Mr. Ingram: The early release of prisoners is an integral part of the Agreement, one which the Government are honouring in full. The Government will not depart from the Agreement by introducing a direct linkage between decommissioning and prisoner releases, which is not in the Agreement nor in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998.

The Government have also made it clear that there must be decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. It is an essential part of the Agreement and we are determined to ensure that all sides meet their obligations. The way to achieve decommissioning is for the full implementation of the Agreement by all parties.

29. **Mr. Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what advice she received from her security advisers at the time of the Good Friday agreement and subsequently concerning the IRA's intentions as regards the decommissioning of arms and explosives. [64883]

Mr. Ingram: In the Good Friday Agreement all parties reaffirmed their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. The hon. Member for Mid-Ulster (Mr. McGuinness) was nominated on 2 September 1998 as a contact between Sinn Fein and the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. The IRA know very well that they must deliver decommissioning as part of the Agreement.

Human Rights and Equality Commissions

18. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made in the establishment of *(a)* the Human Rights Commission and *(b)* the Equality Commission. [64872]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Interviews for the post of Chief Commissioner for the Human Rights Commission were held on 6 and 8 January, interviews for the posts of Commissioner will begin on 21 January. The Secretary of State announced earlier this week that the Chief Commissioner designate is Professor Sidney Brice Dickson of the University of Ulster. A further announcement on the appointment of commissioners will be made at a later date.

A Working Group, comprising the Chairs and Chief Executives of each of the four existing bodies, along with a staff representative, has been established to consider and recommend on the shape and structure of the future Equality Commission. The group is chaired by Dr. Joan Stringer. It is due to report in stages in January. Ministers have asked for the group's early views on Commission posts and will proceed with the appointment process as soon as those views have been received.

28. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made in the establishment of the *(a)* Human Rights Commission and *(b)* Equality Commission. [64882]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Interviews for the post of Chief Commissioner for the Human Rights Commission were held on 6 and 8 January; interviews for the post of Commissioners will begin on 21 January. The Secretary of State announced earlier this week that she has appointed Professor Sidney Brice Dickson as Chief Commissioner designate, a further announcement on the appointment of commissioners will be made at a later date. There has been a very good response to both advertisements and my right hon. Friend expects to be able to appoint a powerful commission.

A Working Group comprising the Chairs and Chief Executives of each of the four existing bodies, along with a staff representative, has been established to consider and recommend on the shape and structure of the future Equality Commission. The group is chaired by Dr. Joan Stringer. It is due to report in stages in January. Ministers have asked for the group's early views on Commission posts and will proceed with the appointment process as soon as those views have been received.

Assembly

19. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made with preparing the Northern Ireland Assembly for devolution of power. [64873]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have drawn up a timetable setting out the necessary legislative and other preparatory steps which will need to be completed to enable devolution to take effect in early March. Copies of that timetable are available from officials in the NIO. I intend to keep in contact with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Assembly parties regarding the detail of the relevant Orders required to be brought before this House over the coming weeks.

Peace Process

21. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement about progress on the peace process. [64875]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy), *Official Report*, column 899.

Victims of Violence

23. **Mrs. Irene Adams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps she is taking to help the victims of violence in Northern Ireland. [64877]

Mr. Ingram: I have announced a number of significant funding initiatives to support victims and a newsletter outlining progress was published on 8 January, a copy of which has been placed in the House of Commons Library. I plan to announce further measures once the outcome of the recently concluded consultation exercise, seeking the views of victims, is known.

Ice Plant, Portavogie Harbour

26. **Mr. John D. Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on progress on the provision of a new ice plant at Portavogie Harbour. [64880]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Currently, the consulting engineers commissioned by the Northern Ireland Fishing Harbour Authority are assessing if the preferred site on the North Quay is suitable for the ice plant. If all goes according to the Authority's plan, it is anticipated that work on the new ice plant will commence in the summer.

Prison Officers (Redundancy Terms)

27. **Mr. Hunter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the redundancy terms being offered to prison officers. [64881]

Mr. Ingram: The terms being offered to prison officers include all benefits payable under the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (NI) but in addition, and to recognise long service in the Northern Ireland Prison Service, there is an enhancement equivalent to 1 month's salary for each year of NIPS service up to a maximum of 24 months.

Benefits (Derry)

Mr. Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people in the Derry City Council area were in receipt of *(a)* income support, *(b)* jobseekers allowance and *(c)* incapacity benefit in (i) December 1997 and (ii) December 1998. [65311]

Mr. McFall: The latest information available is as follows:

	Number of claimants
Income Support	
May 1997	13,200
May 1998	13,745
Jobseekers Allowance[1]	
December 1997	5,779
December 1998	5,410
Incapacity Benefit[1]	
August 1997	5,326
August 1998	5,237

[1] Figures include credit only cases

Planning Applications

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many planning applications are currently the subject of public inquiries; what assessment she has made of the adequacy of the resources of the planning section of the Department of the Environment to deal with these public inquiries; what delays there currently are in the determination of these planning applications; and if she will make a statement. [65676]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its chief executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 20 January 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Question, about the number of planning applications currently the subject of Public Inquiries.

There are 32 applications currently the subject of Public Inquiries under the scope of Article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. These are at various stages of consideration. For example, four applications are awaiting the opening of inquiry proceedings to be held by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC); two applications are currently awaiting the recommendation and report of the PAC following public inquiry, while 26 are at various stages of consideration by the Department following the receipt of the PAC report and recommendation. One additional Public Inquiry has been postponed at the applicant's request.

As regards the resourcing of the Planning Service to deal with these Public Inquiries, resources are allocated in line with the targets set out in its Corporate and Business Plans 1998/99–2000/2001, which are reviewed annually. While there are no delays directly attributable to resource difficulties, nevertheless, certain decision notices have been delayed, largely because of policy considerations.

For example, two decisions in relation to major applications for waste disposal have been deferred by the Minister, pending the outcome of the consultation exercise on the Department's Waste Management Strategy. Decisions on a number of other major housing applications are awaiting legal agreements with the applicants on the implementation of the Department's Quality Initiative. There is also an added time factor in drawing up and agreeing appropriate conditions to be attached to the specific planning applications.

I can assure you, however, that the Planning Service continually strives to expedite all decisions, but particularly those on major applications.

I do hope this is helpful.

Normalisation Strategy Paper

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she plans to publish the strategy paper setting out her approach to normalisation. [65995]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The Secretary of State hopes to publish a paper on security strategy shortly.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many intensive care beds there were in each of the Golden Six hospitals in Northern Ireland at 31 December 1998. [65947]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The table shows the number of intensive care beds in acute hospitals at 31 December 1998.

Hospital	*Number of beds*
Altnagelvin Hospital	5
Antrim Hospital	4
Belfast City Hospital	7
Coleraine	4
Craigavon Area Hospital	4
Erne	2
Mater Infirmorum	2
Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children	6
Royal Victoria Hospital	14
Tyrone County	2
Ulster Hospital	6
Northern Ireland total	56

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many beds were (i) allocated and (ii) vacant within *(a)* maternity, *(b)* gynaecology and *(c)* paediatrics at Craigavon Area Hospital on the first of each month between September 1998 and January 1999. [65951]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The information requested is set out in the table.

Date	*Speciality*	*Allocated*	*Vacant*
1 September 1998	Obstetrics	38	15
1 October 1998	Obstetrics	38	10
1 November 1998	Obstetrics	38	14
1 December 1998	Obstetrics	38	15
1 January 1999	Obstetrics	38	15
1 September 1998	Gynaecology	18	6
1 October 1998	Gynaecology	18	2
1 November 1998	Gynaecology	18	9
1 December 1998	Gynaecology	18	3
1 January 1999	Gynaecology	18	11
1 September 1998	Paediatrics	22	6
1 October 1998	Paediatrics	22	3
1 November 1998	Paediatrics	36	21
1 December 1998	Paediatrics	36	13
1 January 1999	Paediatrics	36	18

Notes:
1. The figures do not include the additional beds which will be opened to accommodate the transfer of services from South Tyrone Hospital (16 Obstetrics and 6 Gynaecology).
2. The figures relate to the 1st of each month at midnight.
3. Paediatric beds increased to 36 on 5 October 1998.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many high dependency beds there are in each acute hospital in Northern Ireland; what was the percentage usage of these beds in each hospital in the last year for which figures are available; and if she will define the difference between high dependency and intensive care facilities. [65949]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The table shows the average number of high dependency beds available daily and percentage occupancy in each acute hospital in Northern Ireland during 1998.

Hospital[1]	*Average number of high dependency beds available daily*	*Percentage occupancy of high dependency beds*
Antrim Hospital	4	43
Craigavon Hospital	2	77
Daisy Hill Hospital	5	82
Downe Hospital	3	60
Erne	3	50
Lagan Valley	2	80
Mater Infirmorum	5	80
Mid-Ulster	7	80
South Tyrone	7	74
Northern Ireland total	38	70

[1] Musgrave Park has 14 high dependency beds but is not, strictly speaking, an acute hospital.

As regards the difference between high dependency and intensive care facilities, broadly speaking, intensive care is usually reserved for patients with potential or established organ failure. An Intensive Care Unit (ICU) should therefore offer the facilities for diagnosis, prevention and treatment of multiple organ failure.

A High Dependency Unit (HDU) is a clinical area offering a standard of care intermediate between the acute ward and full intensive care. The HDU should not manage patients with multi-organ failure but should provide monitoring and support to patients at risk of developing organ system failure. A HDU should be able to undertake short-term resuscitative measures and may provide ventilator support for a short time (usually less than 24 hours) prior to the transfer of a patient to an ICU.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the average occupancy time for intensive care beds in Northern Ireland during 1998. [65948]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The information requested is not collected centrally.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what factors underlay the delays in treatment at the orthopaedics unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital in December; and what was the average time taken to treat patients with fractures *(a)* on 21 December and *(b)* on 11 January. [65950]

Mr. McFall *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The recent upsurge in the number of fracture patients treated at the Royal Victoria Hospital must be seen in the context of a 100 per cent. increase in the fractures treated in the 2 central Belfast Hospitals in the last 10 years. Additional pressures created by a surge in emergency admissions before Christmas and the general effects of the cold weather exacerbated the problems.

On 21 December, 6 patients were treated for fractures in the Royal Victoria Hospital. The average time waited by these patients was 4.6 days. On 11 January, 5 fracture patients were treated in the Royal with an average waiting time of 5 days.

I am determined to ensure that patients admitted to hospital with fractures receive the treatment that they require as soon as possible and certainly no later than the 2 days laid down by current clinical standards and I have taken appropriate steps to achieve this.

Beef Exports

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the level of beef exports from Northern Ireland. [64857]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government are pleased to record that regular weekly exports from Northern Ireland under the Export Certified Herds Scheme started in September 1998. The quantities involved have been small, averaging around 20 tonnes per week involving 7 European Countries. The Republic of South Africa (RSA) have also recently confirmed their willingness to take NI beef again although exports to South Africa have not yet started.

SCOTLAND

Inward Investment

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his action to promote inward investment to Scotland; and if he must seek the approval of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry before making any offer to a potential investor. [66135]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Locate in Scotland promotes Scotland's advantages as a business location, working in partnership with the Local Enterprise Companies, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and other bodies in both the public and private sectors. Its resources are targeted on those markets which generate the strongest flows of outward investment and where Scotland's competitive strengths make it an attractive location.

Offers of assistance are subject to inter-Departmentally agreed rules designed to ensure appropriate co-ordination of assistance offered across the UK. These rules are currently being revised to reflect the devolution settlements and the revised arrangements will be set out in a concordat on financial assistance to industry, which we hope to publish in due course.

Sewage Sludge Recycling

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to the letter of 30 September 1998 from the Minister with responsibility for agriculture, the environment and fisheries to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, if he will make a statement on the outcome of his talks with the water industry and the British Retailers Consortium on the recycling of sewage sludge on farmland. [65399]

Mr. Macdonald: The talks were between the water industry and the British Retail Consortium. The talks resulted in an agreement on the recycling of sewage sludge to farmland. This included ending the application of untreated sewage sludge to grass for silage and grazing by the end of 1998. It also included the phasing out of the application of all untreated sludge to agricultural land by the end of 2001. The Government have already announced they will amend the relevant regulations and code of practice to enforce the 2001 deadline.

Urban Waste Water Treatment

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will announce the date by which secondary treatment of waste water and sewage will be required under the terms of the European Union's Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive; and if he will make a statement. [66350]

Mr. Macdonald: The Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive and our own Regulations require secondary treatment to be applied for discharges to normal waters (i.e. those not designated as sensitive or less sensitive) from communities with population equivalents above 15,000 by the end of 2000. The same standard of treatment must be applied to discharges from smaller communities by the end of 2005.

Compliance with the Directive is a major initiative for the Scottish Water Authorities who will be undertaking capital investment programmes costing £1.5 billion, over the next three years, to modernise the water and sewage industry.

Skye Bridge

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the Scottish Office Development Department post-project evaluation of the socio-economic impact of the Skye Bridge is expected to be completed; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [66265]

Mr. Macdonald: This evaluation is due to be completed by the end of February 1999. A copy of the Final Report will be placed in the Members' Library.

Employment (Agriculture)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each year since 1974 the

number of people in Scotland employed in *(a)* agriculture and *(b)* ancillary trades dependent on agriculture broken down by region. [66604]

Mr. Dewar: The available information is given in the table. Due to reclassification of minor holdings in the Agricultural Census, consistent information is available only from 1976.

Agricultural workers on main and minor agricultural holdings

	Number					*Full-time equivalents*[1]					*Estimated number of ancillary jobs dependent on agriculture in Scotland*[2]
Year	*Scotland*	*North west*	*North east*	*South east*	*South west*	*Scotland*	*North west*	*North east*	*South east*	*South west*	*(Ftes)*
1976	71,686	14,214	13,972	20,155	23,345	60,537	9,989	12,188	18,083	20,277	—
1977	71,258	13,826	13,823	20,173	23,435	59,891	9,697	12,015	17,959	20,219	—
1978	70,986	13,979	13,576	20,046	23,385	59,391	9,734	11,778	17,790	20,089	—
1979	70,356	14,100	13,407	19,542	23,307	58,556	9,748	11,576	17,346	19,886	47,723
1980	70,041	14,193	13,270	19,446	23,133	57,850	9,675	11,373	17,155	19,647	—
1981	68,187	14,360	12,801	18,437	22,589	56,004	9,702	10,948	16,251	19,103	—
1982	69,075	14,967	13,110	18,355	22,644	56,509	10,174	11,107	16,103	19,125	—
1983	69,232	15,321	12,978	18,190	22,744	56,406	10,373	10,979	15,922	19,131	—
1984	68,433	15,544	12,747	17,635	22,507	55,399	10,451	10,719	15,363	18,866	—
1985	69,056	15,970	12,668	17,739	22,679	55,541	10,686	10,599	15,367	18,889	—
1986	67,749	16,226	12,373	16,927	22,223	54,014	10,759	10,282	14,576	18,398	—
1987	67,260	16,754	12,017	16,621	21,868	53,417	11,101	9,968	14,286	18,061	—
1988	66,899	16,700	11,996	16,367	21,836	53,049	11,108	9,884	14,031	18,026	—
1989	66,145	16,453	11,849	16,095	21,748	52,224	10,955	9,700	13,668	17,901	75,307
1990	67,043	16,735	12,179	16,424	21,705	52,128	10,949	9,800	13,685	17,694	—
1991	66,095	16,638	11,876	16,179	21,402	50,652	10,678	9,362	13,321	17,292	—
1992	65,234	16,527	11,954	15,807	20,946	50,158	10,627	9,478	13,069	16,985	—
1993	64,111	16,260	11,811	15,545	20,495	49,090	10,410	9,310	12,781	16,590	—
1994	65,308	17,206	11,895	15,357	20,850	49,534	10,935	9,298	12,571	16,731	42,500
1995	65,014	17,647	11,817	15,052	20,498	48,983	11,208	9,115	12,272	16,389	43,007
1996	65,764	18,272	11,750	15,139	20,603	49,278	11,532	9,037	12,306	16,403	—
1997	65,259	18,403	11,545	15,137	20,174	48,727	11,581	8,846	12,287	16,014	—
1998	66,514	18,653	11,803	15,711	20,347	49,428	11,756	8,952	12,659	16,062	—

[1] Part-time workers estimated as 0.5 full-time equivalents

[2] Estimates of jobs in ancillary trades dependent on agriculture is derived from the Type 1 multipliers from the periodic Scottish Input Output Tables. This is available only for Scotland as a whole.

Ward Beds

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many ward beds were available in Glasgow in 1995; how many ward beds will be available in Glasgow upon the completion of the new Law Hospital; and what were the service costs for the old Law Hospital for each of the years between 1990 and 1995. [65956]

Mr. Galbraith: The number of in-patients beds within the Greater Glasgow Health Board (GGHB) area in 1995 was 8,224. GGHB recognises that changes in flows of patients from Lanarkshire upon completion of the new Law Hospital will impact on the level of demand for in-patient beds, and is still in the process of discussing this, and timescales, with Lanarkshire Health Board. The total Hospital running costs for the old Law Hospital for each of the years between 1990 and 1995 are as follows:

Year	*£000*
1990	20,470
1991	21,840
1992	28,690
1993	33,078
1994	38,904
1995	40,385

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66203]

Mr. Morley: Any contact that this Department's staff have with people outside government, including lobbyists, should be conducted in accordance with the Civil Service Code and the principles of public life set out by the Nolan Committee. The Prime Minister also announced the publication of practical guidance on handling such contacts on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 4, which was circulated to all Departments by the Cabinet Office.

Genetically Engineered Crops

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what independent scientific research on genetically engineered crops the regulatory authorities in the United Kingdom and the EU have access to; and what are the arrangements for licensing such research. [66016]

Mr. Meale: I have been asked to reply.

The regulatory authorities in the United Kingdom have to access all scientific research papers and articles published in international scientific journals. These are available through abstracting services, departmental libraries and the British Library.

The regulatory authorities also have access to independent research through members of the Government's advisory committees on biotechnology, such as the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) and the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP). Members of these committees are leading experts in their own fields and will be aware of the latest scientific research and developments. Regulatory authorities in the EU will have access to similar sources of scientific research results and exchange information at regular meetings of the Competent Authorities.

My Department and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food fund independent scientific research on genetically modified crops. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the then Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallesey (Angela Eagle), on 8 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *313*, and the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 12 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *316–18*. The EU also funds biotechnology research through the Framework Programmes.

Where the research involves the release of a genetically modified organism to the environment this requires prior approval (licensing) from the Secretary of State or the relevant Competent Authority under Directive 90/220/EC *on the deliberate Release of genetically modified organisms to the environment*. Research involving the contained use of genetically modified crops must be notified to Health and Safety Executive under provisions in Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and The Genetically Modified Organisms (Risk Assessment) (Records and Exemptions) Regulations 1996, as amended in 1997. The human health and safety aspects of larger GMOs are covered by the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended in 1996.

Raw Cows' Milk

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what conclusions he and the Secretary of State for Wales have reached following their review of the law relating to the drinking of raw cows' milk in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [67090]

Mr. Nick Brown: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I have decided not to stop the sale of raw cows' drinking milk in England and Wales. However, we intend to introduce tighter checks to benefit consumers who choose to drink raw cows' milk.

The new measures will include increasing the frequency of official microbiological sample testing of raw cows' drinking milk at production premises to four times a year and increasing the frequency of official inspections of registered raw cows' milk production holdings to once a year. These measures will begin immediately.

Raw milk producers will continue to pay for official checks, and we will be putting in hand arrangements to extend the scope of enforcement at production holdings. In addition, we intend that on-farm caterers will no longer be exempted from the charges for microbiological sample testing, and also that the full costs of inspection and sample testing will be recovered. This will necessitate changes to the relevant regulations, and in due course we will issue draft regulations for public consultation.

There is already a requirement to label raw cows' drinking milk with a public health warning. We will be putting into place arrangements to ensure this is given greater prominence. In addition, these arrangements will also require that labels on retail packaging, and notices displayed at on-farm catering premises, must include the Chief Medical Officer's advice, which is that children, pregnant women, elderly people and those who are currently unwell or have a chronic illness should not consume raw cows' milk.

We emphasise in the strongest possible terms that the industry is responsible, and remains responsible, for the production of safe food. Producers of raw cows' drinking milk must ensure that it is produced to the best hygienic standards.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many of the study areas required by the Krebs report to investigate links between badgers and bovine TB have *(a)* been identified, *(b)* been surveyed and *(c)* been announced, and in how many study areas the study has been (i) commenced and (ii) suspended. [66080]

Mr. Rooker: The Krebs report concluded that a minimum of 30, 100 square kilometre areas be used for the randomised badger culling trial as part of a wider programme including epidemiological and research work. This recommendation was supported by the Independent Scientific Group appointed to advise on the implementation of the Krebs report recommendations. The areas will be grouped into triplets each containing three areas, one subject to proactive culling, one to reactive culling and the third a control area where no culling will take place.

The first two triplets were designated by the Group in August 1998 and announced on 17 August. One was on the Devon and Cornwall border and the other on the borders of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire. The remaining 24 areas (8 triplets) are to be phased in over the next two years, and will be in areas where the incidence of TB in cattle is historically highest and where there is the greatest risk of contiguous and repeat breakdowns. The next triplets will be identified shortly, and will then be announced.

Once a triplet is identified and mapped, land holders are contacted and asked for permission to survey the land for badger activity and to remove badgers from culling areas. Although participation in the trial is on a voluntary basis, the overwhelming majority of land holders agreed to take part. Visiting and surveying in the first two triplets began on 28 August. Surveying of the Devon/Cornwall triplet was completed at the end of November, and is continuing in the other triplet.

On 4 November 1998, in accordance with prescribed procedures and in the presence of an independent witness, each area in the Devon/Cornwall triplet was randomly allocated one of the three treatments (proactive, reactive, survey only). Cage trapping of badgers in the area around Putford which had been allocated proactive culling was carried out from 2 to 13 December 1998 inclusive. Work in the area progressed as planned and was not disrupted significantly. 238 badgers were caught and humanely despatched by shooting. The carcases were subject to post mortem examination in MAFF laboratories and samples have been taken for further analysis.

Once the initial proactive culling is complete in a triplet the comparative study of TB incidents in cattle begins. This is the position in the Cornwall/Devon triplet where TB incidents in the three trial areas are being monitored. Where a new TB incident is confirmed in the reactive culling area, arrangements will be made to cull badgers from social groups associated with the farm involved. No culling will take place during the closed season which runs from 1 February to 30 April inclusive.

Work has not been suspended in any area.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Learning Direct

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many calls each month to Learning Direct are provided for in the contract with his Department. [66354]

Mr. Mudie: In its first year of operation, the DfEE set Learning Direct a target of 250,000 calls. Specific monthly targets were not set.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what evidence he has of successful referrals by the Learning Direct helpline overall and broken down by *(a)* age, *(b)* sex, *(c)* employment status, *(d)* region and *(e)* qualifications. [66358]

Mr. Mudie: It is too early to measure the success of referrals by the Learning Direct helpline. Information on follow up action of callers will be made available as part of the evaluation process of the helpline later in the year.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the most common areas of inquiry made to the Learning Direct helpline. [66357]

Mr. Mudie: The most common areas of inquiry made to the Learning Direct helpline are requests for information and advice on Further Education (33 per cent. of calls), information technology and computers (18 per cent.) professional development (17 per cent.) and Higher Education (15 per cent.). Inquiries to the helpline are, however, dependent to some extent on the nature of marketing of Learning Direct and associated broadcaster campaigns.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have telephoned the Learning Direct helpline during each month of its operation. [66353]

Mr. Mudie: There were 406,069 successful callers to the Learning Direct helpline during the period from its official launch on 25 February to the end of December 1998. A monthly breakdown is as follows:

	Number
February	5,241
March	15,654
April	11,970
May	165,816
June	78,272
July	23,400
August	28,987
September	26,710
October	21,496
November	15,314
December	13,209

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the percentage of callers to the Learning Direct helpline who succeed in reaching an operator *(a)* on average and *(b)* at the busiest times. [66263]

Mr. Mudie: Currently, 86 per cent. of callers to Learning Direct are successful in reaching an operator. The figures for callers at the busiest times are not available.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of callers to the Learning Direct helpline get through at the first attempt *(a)* on average and *(b)* at the busiest times. [66355]

Mr. Mudie: A recent independent evaluation of Learning Direct showed that, on average, 77 per cent. of those using Learning Direct were connected at the first attempt. The figures for callers at the busiest times are not available.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish a breakdown of callers to the Learning Direct helpline by *(a)* age, *(b)* sex, *(c)* employment status and *(d)* highest qualification gained. [66356]

Mr. Mudie: Learning Direct offers a confidential service to callers. Therefore, a breakdown of all callers is not available. Based on a 10 per cent. random sample, the breakdown of callers to Learning Direct is as follows:

	Percentage
(a) Age	
Up to 17	2
18–25	18
26–35	34
36–45	24
46–55	11
56–65	6
65+	5
(b) Sex	
Male	44
Female	56
(c) Employment Status	
Employed	46
Self-employed	3
Reg. Unemployed	18

	Percentage
Retired	10
In education	8
Woman returner	10
Other	5
(d) Highest qualification gained	
Postgraduate or professional qualification	19
First degree	16
GCE A level, HND/C	17
CSE, GCSE and equivalent	33
Other	7
No qualification	8

Sure Start Strategy

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for implementing the Sure Start strategy. [67089]

Ms Jowell: Sure Start is a vital element in the Government's work to increase opportunity and create equal chances for young children and their families in disadvantaged areas. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I are taking forward the Government's £452 million strategy to establish at least 250 local Sure Start programmes in England over the next three years.

We are announcing today the first 60 trailblazer districts for Sure Start. In identifying them we have taken into account evidence of significant local deprivation and existing good practice; and a wish to see Sure Start principles taking root quickly in all regions, in different types of area and in places where they can complement other Government initiatives to regenerate communities and tackle social exclusion.

The trailblazer districts will play a major role in making Sure Start a reality. Each will identify one catchment area appropriate for a local Sure Start programme, and bring together an inclusive partnership responsible for making a formal application for Sure Start funding to improve and extend services in that area. Expressions of interest from the 60 districts are invited by 9 February and full applications by 19 March. Applications will not compete against each other. We are providing a team of expert advisers to help local partners prepare them, and they will be approved if they meet various criteria, including the inclusion of all the key partners at local level and effective demonstration of the key principles underpinning Sure Start.

We expect the first trailblazers to be up and running later in the year. They will help develop Sure Start, its implementation and evaluation, and act as mentors for subsequent programmes. More Sure Start districts will be announced in due course.

Further information and guidance on Sure Start is being published today to support trailblazers in their work. Copies will be placed in the Library.

The 60 trailblazer districts are:

Barrow-in Furness
Birmingham
Blackburn with Darwen
Blackpool
Bradford
Brent
Brighton and Hove
Bristol
Camden
Copeland
Corby
Derby
Doncaster
Enfield
Fenland
Great Yarmouth
Greenwich
Hackney
Halton
Haringey
Hastings
Kingston-upon-Hull
Kirklees
Knowsley
Lambeth
Leeds
Leicester
Liverpool
Luton
Manchester
Mansfield
Middlesbrough
Newcastle
Newham
North East Lincolnshire
North Tyneside
Norwich
Nottingham
Oldham
Oxford
Penwith
Plymouth
Redcar and Cleveland
Rotherham
Salford
Sandwell
Sedgemoor
Sheffield
Southampton
Southwark
St. Helens
Stoke-on-Trent
Sunderland
Telford and Wrekin
Thanet
Thurrock
Tower Hamlets
Waltham Forest
Wealden
Wolverhampton.

Edison Project

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the performance of the Edison Project in running schools in the United States of America; what discussions he has held on its possible use to run schools in *(a)* education action zones and *(b)* other areas where those schools are deemed to have failed; what is his policy towards the use of profit-making organisations to run state schools; and if he will make a statement. [65917]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department has not carried out any assessment of the activities of the Edison Project in the United States of America, although we have seen reports of some published evaluations. Officials have talked to representatives of the Project about the scope for private sector involvement in EAZs and in turning round failing schools. In all cases it has been made clear that as a matter of law the responsibility for running maintained schools rests with the governing body, which is responsible for spending the school budget in the best interests of pupils.

In addition, we have made it clear that "schools run schools", under the Education Act and in accordance with the new fair funding arrangements.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66193]

Mr. Mudie: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*.

Electrical Contracting Industry

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place in the Library copies of the contents of Public Record Office file FS27/486 relating to the Joint Industry Board of the Electrical Contracting Industry. [65766]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have been asked to reply.

The file in question is deposited in the Public Records Office and is open for public inspection. The PRO will provide a copy of the contents for the House of Commons Library on request.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU Fundamental Rights Charter

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on German proposals to preface the European Communities Treaties with a Charter of Fundamental Rights. [66139]

Ms Quin: The Germans have expressed an interest in developing a European Charter of Basic Rights, in consultation with the European Parliament, national parliaments and as many social groups as possible. We will form a view once details of the German proposals are available.

Sri Lanka

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current political situation in Sri Lanka. [66376]

Mr. Fatchett: We believe that a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka can be reached only through a political settlement. During my visit to Colombo in November last year I made it clear to the Sri Lankan Government that we remain ready to help in the resolution of the conflict if both sides ask us to play a role. But it is for the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to work to reach a negotiated settlement.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Aceh, Indonesia, with particular reference to Operasi Wibawa '99. [66627]

Mr. Fatchett: We are concerned about the recent reports of violence in Aceh and deeply regret the killings of both civilians and military personnel. We call on all sides to show restraint, and look to the Indonesian Government to conduct a full investigation into the killings and to bring to justice those responsible.

British Council

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much was spent by the British Council in investment in infrastructure and information technology for each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [66235]

Mr. Fatchett: Owing to a change by the British Council accruals accounting in April 1995, the information on investment is available on a consistent basis only for the three-year period from 1995–96 to 1997–98. In each of these years, the British Council's average gross investment in its built estate and in information technology was £12 million. The equivalent figure for the present financial year is £11.3 million while, as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review, the average for each of the next three years will be £15 million.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on British Council work, funded by his Department, to support civil society, human rights and democracy in East and West Africa. [66218]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Council is well placed to promote human rights and good governance because of its unique status and long experience in these fields. In the case of East and West Africa, the British Council manages projects to the value of more than £300,000 under the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Human Rights Project Fund. These include anti-corruption campaigns, management training for NGO staff, improving judicial systems, networking between human rights groups, women's rights, and programmes to support democracy.

In addition, projects in these fields are funded from the grant-in-aid which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office gives to the British Council

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66202]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

European Commission

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the name, position and nationality of all EC officials who have been indicted on charges of fraud, dishonesty or maladministration, since 1990 together with details of the disciplinary action taken. [66406]

Ms Quin: We have approached the European Commission for this information. I will write to the hon. Member shortly, placing copies in the Library of the House.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list Commission officials suspended since 1990 on (i) full, (ii) half and (iii) no pay, stating in each case *(a)* the accusation, *(b)* the end result of the investigations concerned and *(c)* the severance pay where supplied; [66321]

(2) what types of firearms are issued to employees of the European Commission; what performance enhancers are made available for these weapons; and what numbers are involved; [66325]

(3) which employees of the European Commission are entrusted with firearms; and under what authority those arms have been issued; [66320]

(4) if he will make a statement on the purpose of firearms being issued to employees of the European Commission; [66326]

(5) what the rules of engagement are for employees of the European Commission entrusted with firearms; [66323]

(6) if he will make a statement on the secured storage facilities available for firearms possessed by the European Commission; [66324]

(7) what training is available in firearms skills for employees of the European Commission. [66322]

Ms Quin: We have approached the Commission for this information. I will write to the right hon. Member shortly, placing copies in the Library of the House.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the report submitted by the Commission at the General Affairs Council of 26 to 27 October 1998 concerning fraud allegations relating to the EC Humanitarian Office; and if he will list the corrected documents submitted. [66379]

Ms Quin: The Commission President, Mr. Santer, gave an oral report to Foreign Ministers over lunch on 25 October 1998. There is no official record. Mr. Santer explained the background to the EC Humanitarian Aid Office fraud and the Commission's proposal to establish an external anti-fraud office (Document 14031—deposited in the House Library on 23 December). It is not clear to which "corrected documents" the right hon. Member refers. If the right hon. Member would care to write to me giving any additional information he may have, I shall be happy to investigate.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will deposit in the Library a copy of all guidelines for Commission staff operating in *(a)* other Member States and *(b)* the United Kingdom relating to (i) handling the media and (ii) maintaining political neutrality. [66380]

Ms Quin: We understand from the Commission that there are currently no such written guidelines for staff at Commission Representations in the Member States, including those in the United Kingdom. However, on 11 January 1999, President Santer announced that three codes of conduct would be drawn up governing the work of Members of the Commission and Commission staff. These are expected to cover issues of this kind.

EU Enlargement

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department received each of the European Commission Enlargement reports entitled Enlargement 98 in respect of *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* Czech Republic, *(d)* Slovenia, *(e)* Estonia and *(f)* Cyprus. [66119]

Ms Quin: We received copies of the Commission's Progress Reports on all the candidate countries, via the internet, on 4 November 1998—the day they were agreed by the College of Commissioners. The texts were subsequently presented to the 9 November General Affairs Council. Formal transmission of the texts, from the Commission to the Council Secretariat, took place on 18 December 1998. The Council Secretariat is in the process of forwarding them to Member States. We will deposit copies in the Library of the House once we receive a full set.

General Pinochet

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if reports submitted by the British Embassy in Madrid, to his Department, made reference to potential difficulties for Her Majesty's Government with respect to the presence of General Pinochet in British territory in connection with the work undertaken by Judge Garzón; how many reports submitted by the embassy referred to Judge Garzón's investigations; and if he will make a statement. [66347]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Embassy in Madrid sent four reports in 1997 and 1998 relating to Judge Garzón's investigations into human rights violations in Chile during the Pinochet years. None of these reports anticipated that Judge Garzón's investigations would cause HMG any difficulty.

St. Malo Summit

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Joint Declarations of the St. Malo summit for *(a)* future co-location of embassies and *(b)* sharing of restricted information pertaining to local politics in African countries. [66342]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The St. Malo Declaration on Africa agreed that both governments would explore the scope for co-location of Embassies. This would involve sharing premises in one or more sites, if there were benefits to be gained from doing so. We have done this successfully with other countries elsewhere in the world. The Declaration also included provisions for information sharing on the situation in Africa, in particular on countries where either the UK or France is not represented. We see this as a useful area for cooperation, which will be of mutual benefit and will extend our knowledge of these countries.

Burma

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what legal factors he has to take account of with regard to the imposition of financial sanctions on Burma. [66155]

Mr. Fatchett: Financial sanctions need to be compatible with the UK's international obligations. They are a matter for action by the European Community as a whole in accordance with the Treaty of Rome (Articles 73 (g) (1) and 228 (a)). They must also be compatible with membership of the World Trade Organisation. A mandatory United Nations Security Council Resolution would override these obligations but there is at present no consensus for such action.

Iraq

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what communications Her Majesty's Government have had with *(a)* the United States administration and *(b)* the Secretary General of the United Nations over the past year in respect of the use to which information obtained by (i) UNSCOM and (b) IAEA inspectors in Iraq has been put. [66429]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have been in regular touch with both the US Administration and the UN Secretary General on many aspects of the work of UNSCOM and the IAEA over the past year.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the allegations by former UNSCOM inspector, Scott Ritter, published in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 10 January 1999. [66476]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The 10 January *The Sunday Telegraph* article referred to allegations that the UK withdrew cooperation from UNSCOM last year in protest at US spying activities. This allegation is false. The UK has never withdrawn cooperation from UNSCOM.

UNSCOM is entitled to seek information and advice from all possible sources in pursuit of its mandate to destroy Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability. UNSCOM Executive Chairman Richard Butler has made clear that he has always insisted on all UNSCOM activity being carried out strictly in pursuit of its disarmament mandate, not to benefit any individual member state. The US has also denied any impropriety in its contacts with UNSCOM.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the observations by the Foreign Minister of France concerning the lifting of sanctions on Iraq. [65397]

Mr. Fatchett: We have welcomed the proposals put forward recently by France as a useful basis for discussion on the way forward on Iraq. However, our position remains that the oil embargo cannot be lifted until Iraq has fulfilled its obligations in relation to its weapons of mass destruction programmes as set out in UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 687, and that other sanctions cannot be lifted until Iraq has complied with all its obligations under the relevant UNSCRs.

British Diplomats (Freetown Officials)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which officials in *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Ministry of Defence were informed of the facility extended by the German Government to British diplomats, to communicate with officials in the United Kingdom from Freetown, Sierra Leone, in the years 1997 and 1998; and on which occasions this facility was used. [66628]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Mr. Penfold had access to normal communication whilst at the High Commission in Freetown and whilst in the United Kingdom. Whilst he was in Conakry, Mr. Penfold was able to receive classified telegrams via the German Embassy but used commercial fax facilities for sending messages to London.

The following British Diplomatic Missions were informed in August 1997 that telegrams could be passed to Conakry for Mr. Penfold via Bonn:

Accra, Dakar, Banjul, Abidjan, Lagos, Abuja, Washington, UKMIS New York.

Telegrams that were sent to Bonn for forwarding were marked to this effect and circulated to officials in Government Departments in London including the FCO and MOD.

Bananas

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with *(a)* European Union ministers about the import duties being placed by the EU on bananas and *(b)* the United States Government about the retaliatory duties being placed on EU goods; and if he will make a statement. [66259]

Ms Quin: The EU's new banana regime was agreed during the UK Presidency. The Government support the new regime which is designed to help banana dependent Caribbean economies while meeting WTO obligations.

The current EU/US dispute over the WTO compatibility of the new regime was discussed at the December General Affairs Council which my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary attended. EU Foreign

Ministers gave their backing to the Commission approach of robustly defending the banana regime while constructively addressing US concerns over the WTO process.

The Government have been working to prevent the imposition of US retaliatory duties. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and other senior Government Ministers have, on several recent occasions, raised the issue with their US counterparts.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Ministers (Business Affairs Investigations)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to disclose all the papers relating to investigations undertaken by his Department into the business affairs of serving Government Ministers. [66450]

Mr. Byers: My Department has no direct role in the investigation of the business affairs of ministers or any other individuals. Its role is confined to the conduct of limited companies. The extent to which papers may be disclosed depends on the nature of the case itself and other considerations such as the applicable law and commercial confidentiality. Subject to these constraints I would wish to be as open as possible on these matters.

British Airways

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his predecessor received advice from the Permanent Secretary at the DTI that there was no conflict of interest which prevented him dealing with competition issues arising from the proposed British Airways alliance with American Airlines. [66644]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), on 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *65*.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what amount of export credit guarantees are outstanding for Indonesia *(a)* for defence-related equipment and *(b)* for other goods. [64533]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* From data readily available, ECGD's exposure on Indonesia currently stands at £1,575 million and breaks down as follows:

	£ million
(a) Defence related equipment	760
(b) Other goods	815

Defence-related equipment includes all ECGD covered business with defence buyers, including sales of non-lethal equipment.

Wellcome Trust

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the letter of 22 September from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, if he will list the contributions of the Wellcome Trust to significant additional investments in areas of science *(a)* in the biomedical area and *(b)* outside the biomedical area. [65395]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* As previously announced, we are grateful to the Wellcome Trust for providing the following funding for joint activities with the Government in support of major research programmes within the Science and Engineering Base.

	£ million
Joint infrastructure fund	300
University Challenge	up to 18
New synchrotron radiation facility	110

These contributions are additional to the Trust's previously planned expenditure on university research over the life-time of these projects.

None of these projects have yet progressed to a stage where payments to recipients have been made, but all of these contributions will be in support of biomedical research.

Iraqi Exports

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what information he has collated about Iraqi exports of *(a)* dates, *(b)* wheat and *(c)* other products. [65385]

Mr. Wilson: Information on Iraqi exports of dates and wheat is not readily available from official sources. The International Monetary Fund has estimated from partner country records that Iraq's total exports of goods in 1997 amounted to US$2,309 million. Exports of Iraqi oil approved by the United Nations are monitored by the UN.

Medical Exports

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people are employed by Government departments and agencies to assist in supporting and promoting exports of medical and pharmaceutical equipment; and at what cost. [66037]

Mr. Wilson: Principal responsibility for promoting exports in this sector rests with three civil servants in the Export Promotion Command of my Department in liaison with five officials from the Department of Health and an Export Promoter seconded from industry. The running cost of the civil servants themselves, excluding the programme budget for which they are responsible, is £254k.

The total cost of the Overseas Trade Service's export promotion programme in 1997–98 was estimated to have been approximately £220 million, of which £165 million was the cost of 824.55 posts in the DTI, 92 staff in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and FCO staff in 217 overseas posts with commercial sections. Figures indicating the percentage of these resources devoted to promoting exports of medical and pharmaceutical equipment are not available.

German Parcels

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the Treasury Minute of Approval in respect of the purchase of German Parcels by the Post Office. [66021]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Treasury approval was given in the form of a letter from the then Chief Secretary to the then Secretary of State. In accordance with the normal conventions, it would not be appropriate to publish this letter.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the details of the purchase of German Parcels by the Post Office will be supplied to the Committee of Public Accounts. [66019]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The financial consequences of any investments made by the Post Office will be appropriately reflected in the Post Office annual report and accounts. These will be laid before Parliament in the usual way.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reasons details of the purchase of German Parcels by the Post Office have not been published. [66023]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* A great deal of information is available on the Post Office acquisition of German Parcels. But this is a commercial transaction. The Post Office have advised us that they do not have details of similar acquisitions made by their European post office competitors—details which it would be to their advantage to know. They therefore do not want exact details of their own purchase to be released for reasons of commercial confidentiality. We respect that.

However, the estimated turnover of German Parcels for the current year is around £265 million. A normal core price for such an acquisition might be the annual turnover plus any special assets. The agreed purchase price for German Parcels is in line with this.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what arrangements have been made to enable the National Audit Office to examine the purchase by the Post Office of German Parcels; [66020]

(2) if the Comptroller and Auditor General has given his agreement to the decision not to publish details of the purchase of German Parcels by the Post Office. [66022]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answers 18 January 1999]:* Under Schedule 4 of the National Audit Act 1983 the Post Office is specifically exempted from the Comptroller and Auditor General's responsibilities for the examination of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which public bodies carry out their functions. Post Office accounts are prepared in accordance with commercial practice and are audited by external auditors appointed by the Secretary of State rather than by the National Audit Office.

However, the National Audit Office, through the Comptroller and Auditor General, has a right under Section 6(1) of the National Audit Act 1983 (as qualified by Section 6(2) of the Act) to examine the DTI's and Treasury's roles in approving the purchase of German Parcels.

Coal Mining Subsidence

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive the Coal Authority's fourth report on the administration of the coal mining subsidence damage repair and compensation scheme. [67092]

Mr. Battle: I have now received this report from the Coal Authority and have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses today.

Electrical Contracting Industry

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if, following the dissolution of the Joint Industry Board for the Electrical Contracting Industry and its voluntary de-registration as a trade union in 1991, a successor body with similar objectives has re-registered as a trade union or registered as an employer's association. [66146]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No. I am not aware that the Joint Industry Board for the Electrical Contracting Industry has been dissolved. No successor body with similar objectives has applied for listing as a trade union or as an employers' association.

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Joint Advisory Board for the Electrical Contracting Industry was granted permission by ministers to operate an industry scheme of redundancy payments; and if he will make a statement. [66145]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No. The Joint Industry Board for the Electrical Contracting Industry does, however, operate a Dismissals Procedures Agreement designated by the Secretary of State under S110 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 but that agreement does not cover redundancy payments.

Prepayment Gas Meters

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the percentage of gas consumers in England and Wales who use *(a)* electronic token, *(b)* coin and *(c)* mechanical token prepayment gas meters. [65961]

Mr. Battle: As of September 1998, out of some 19 million domestic gas consumers, the percentage of customers using prepayment gas meters was approximately as follows: *(a)* electronic token, 7 per cent., *(b)* coin, 0.5 per cent., *(c)* mechanical token, less than 0.1 per cent.

London and Bishopsgate Investments

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his Department is investigating alleged improprieties in the actions of London and Bishopsgate Investments in the late 1980s and early 1990s. [66624]

Mr. Byers: It is not the Department's policy to comment on whether or not it is carrying out an investigation. The right hon. Member refers in his question to

"alleged improprieties in the actions of London and Bishopsgate Investments in the late 1980s and early 1990s".

If the hon. Member has particular information about these alleged improprieties, he should make it available to the Company Law and Investigations Directorate of my Department.

Regional Aid

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the results of his consultations carried out with regions from which regional aid is to be withdrawn. [66141]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* No decisions have yet been made on the areas which will be ineligible for regional aid after 1 January 2000. The Government have, however, carried out consultations on the review of Assisted Areas with a range of interested parties.

On the reform of Structural Funds, negotiations with the Commission and Member States are continuing and are likely to do so until March 1999.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the new map for regional selective assistance to be proposed to the European Commission. [66133]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* No decisions have yet been made on the areas that will be proposed to the European Commission.

Aerospace Research and Development

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with aerospace companies about the civil aircraft research and development budget; and if he will make a statement on future spending on CARAD. [66260]

Mr. Battle: The Department has maintained a close dialogue with the aerospace industry concerning the support available for civil research which has been provided under the Department's Civil Aircraft Research and Technology Demonstration (CARAD) programme. Detailed allocations for all DTI budgets, including CARAD, have yet to be made.

Industrial Energy Taxes

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the meeting between EC Competition Commissioner Karel Van Miert and the German Finance Minister, Oskar Lafontaine on 7 January, on the proposals of the German presidency relating to the introduction of industrial energy taxes. [66423]

Mr. Battle: The meeting was to discuss domestic issues relevant to Germany alone. It is not for me to comment on these.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what renewable energy schemes in the United Kingdom have been part or fully funded by *(a)* European Community energy programmes and *(b)* the European Investment Bank. [66622]

Mr. Battle: In the four year period 1995 to 1998, the European Community THERMIE Programme offered support to twenty two projects concerning renewable energy plant in the United Kingdom.

The European Community JOULE programme has supported a large number of renewable energy research and development projects. JOULE projects are collaborative with the results shared between partners in different Member States. The ALTENER programme focuses on projects promoting renewable energy, for example the dissemination of information, developing financial instruments and training. ALTENER projects are collaborative with an emphasis on the wide dissemination of project results. Information about JOULE and THERMIE projects can be found on the CORDIS database, accessed through the World Wide Web. The address is: http://www.cordis.lu/. The ALTENER home page address is: http://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg17/altener.htm.

The European Investment Bank has supported three renewable energy projects in the United Kingdom, all waste to energy plants.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures his Department is taking to promote domestic renewable energy expertise to overseas markets; and if he will make a statement. [66619]

Mr. Battle: My Department assists British renewable energy companies to win export orders worldwide, and has had a focused programme of activities including, trade missions, overseas seminars and exhibitions, inward visits, market research and information dissemination. This programme is supported by two dedicated Trade Promoters, who have been concentrating their efforts on target markets such as China, India and Spain. For example, last autumn the Minister for Science opened a renewable energy seminar, and associated trade mission, in Peking. We also take advantage of other opportunities in overseas markets, which in the past year have included, Poland, United States and the Philippines.

British renewable energy exports are estimated to have risen from an historic level of £10–15 million p.a. in the early 90's to around £80–100 million p.a. in the last two years.

Multinationals (OECD Guidelines)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to participate in updating, expanding and promoting the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's guidelines for multinational enterprises. [65978]

Mr. Wilson: The Government have been taking an active part in the current review of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises which began last June. In preparing our positions on the issues addressed by the Guidelines, this Department has consulted widely with other Government Departments and with business, trade unions and interested NGOs. We will seek to modernise and strengthen the Guidelines to reflect more recent developments, particularly in the labour and environment areas and, together with all stakeholders, will explore ways of increasing awareness and encouraging adherence.

Nuclear Power Stations

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many cracks have appeared in nuclear power stations in each of the last 20 years; and how many have been repaired. [65744]

Mr. Battle: Arrangements under nuclear site licences require the licensees to notify the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Safety Directorate (NSD) of the discovery of any cracks which might challenge their current safety case; some of these may have potential structural significance. Nuclear power stations, like all engineering structures, may also contain many structurally insignificant cracks, so the information is not available in the exact form requested.

Few of the many cracks identified over the years in nuclear power plants have been judged structurally significant and so necessitated repair. Examples of cracks that have necessitated repair are those found in Magnox coolant ducts during the 1980s, cracks in AGR steam headers and pipework and cracks in the boiler shells at Sizewell A power station. Details of these have been made publicly available via either the HSE's publication of the results of NSD's reviews of the licensees' Periodic Safety Reviews (PSRs) or in quarterly NSD reports over the years to local liaison committees.

Further operation of any plant in which a potentially significant crack has been detected is not permitted until the licensee has provided a written safety case that demonstrates it would be safe and NSD has agreed to it. If repairs are necessary to enable a satisfactory safety case to be made, these must be made to the appropriate nuclear standard before NSD allows the operation of the plant to recommence.

Inward Investment

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) which Minister has primary responsibility for ensuring that England, Scotland and Wales do not compete against one another for inward investment; [66137]

(2) what roles the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales and he play in encouraging inward investment in England, Scotland and Wales; [66131]

(3) when details of the Concordat on Inward Investment will be published. [66152]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Invest in Britain Bureau—which is jointly managed by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—is the national agency promoting the UK as the number one location for inward investment in Europe. It works in partnership, under the Committee on Overseas Promotion arrangements, with the inward investment agencies of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions.

There is no question of one Minister having primary responsibility for ensuring that competition between different parts of the UK is not wasteful. All Ministers have a collective interest in ensuring that offers of financial assistance represent value for money for the taxpayer.

The Government will be strengthening the current arrangements through a Concordat on financial assistance to industry. The Government expect that they will be in a position to publish the Concordat soon.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 21 January 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Higher Education

Mr. Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many full-time students, normally domiciled in the Northern Ireland Western Education and Library Board area, enrolled in higher education courses for the current academic year. [65309]

Mr. McFall: This information is not available in the form requested. However, 2,534 full-time students domiciled in the area of the Western Education and Library Board applied for financial support to attend higher education courses in the current academic year.

Clifton Special Care School, Bangor

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many students are enrolled at Clifton Special Care School, Bangor; if a nurse is available in the school; and if she will make a statement. [65960]

Mr. McFall: 98 pupils are currently enrolled at Clifton Special School. At present there is no nurse available in Clifton School, but the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust are working with the South Eastern Education and Library Board to arrange provision of the required level of nursing support.

Retired Teachers (Returnees)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the number of retired teachers who subsequently returned to teach for limited periods in primary schools for the most recent 12 month period for which figures are available; and if she will make a statement about opportunities for recently trained teachers. [65959]

Mr. McFall: 673 retired teachers were re-employed in primary schools on a temporary basis during the 1997–98 school year.

The Department of Education has advised employing authorities and schools that, wherever possible, preference should be given to newly qualified teachers or experienced teachers seeking to return to employment, when filling vacancies, including those of a temporary nature.

In the year after qualification, the vast majority of around 650 teachers who qualify each year should obtain teaching posts. For example, a total of only 11 primary and secondary school teachers of age 24 years or under were registered as unemployed for more than 6 months at the end of the 1997–98 school year.

Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how she intends to fund the costs incurred by the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in caring for the dangerous wild animals that were taken into their care on behalf of public agencies, from Seskinore, Co. Tyrone, on 8 November 1997. [67440]

Marjorie Mowlam: Costs incurred by the USPCA in caring for these animals until ownership formally passed to the Society on 26 October 1998 amount to £54,329. It is proposed to share these costs on an equal three way basis across the budgets for the Police Authority for Northern Ireland and the Departments of Agriculture and Environment for Northern Ireland. Parliament's approval to meet these costs in the current year will be sought in a Supplementary estimate for Department of the Environment Vote 4 (Environment and other Services). Pending that approval, payment will be made from repayable advances from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

SCOTLAND

NHSnet

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which NHS trusts and health boards are currently connected to the NHSnet; when he expects every NHS trust and health board to have a link to the NHSnet; what future resources will be required to *(a)* complete and *(b)* support this service; and what resources have been allocated to this project (i) this year and (ii) in each of the next three financial years. [65762]

Mr. Galbraith: All Health Boards and NHS Trusts will be linked to NHSnet by 31 March 1999. The current position of Health Boards and NHS Trusts is set out in the table. Resources allocated to this project in this year are £6 million. The ongoing costs of supporting these links will be met by the Health Boards and Trusts.

Board/NHS trusts	*Linkage complete*	*Linkage planned by 31 March 1999*
Argyll and Clyde Health Board	Yes	
Argyll and Bute NHS Trust	Yes	
Inverclyde Royal NHS Trust	Yes	
Lomond Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
Renfrewshire Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
Royal Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust	Yes	

Board/NHS trusts	Linkage complete	Linkage planned by 31 March 1999
Ayrshire and Arran Health Board	Yes	
Ayrshire and Arran Community Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
North Ayrshire and Arran NHS Trust		Yes
South Ayrshire and Arran NHS Trust	Yes	
Borders Health Board	Yes	
Borders Community Health Services NHS Trust	Yes	
Borders General Hospital NHS Trust	Yes	
Dumfries and Galloway Health Board	Yes	
Dumfries and Galloway Acute and Maternity Hospitals NHS Trust		Yes
Dumfries and Galloway Community Health Services NHS Trust		Yes
Fife Health Board	Yes	
Fife Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
Kirkcaldy Acute Hospitals NHS Trust	Yes	
Queen Margaret Hospital NHS Trust	Yes	
Forth Valley Health Board	Yes	
Central Scotland Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
Falkirk and District Royal Infirmary NHS Trust	Yes	
Stirling Royal Infirmary NHS Trust	Yes	
Grampian Health Board	Yes	
Aberdeen Royal Hospitals NHS Trust	Yes	
Grampian Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
Moray Health Services NHS Trust	Yes	
Greater Glasgow Health Board	Yes	
Glasgow Dental Hospital and School NHS Trust		Yes
Glasgow Royal Infirmary University NHS Trust		Yes
Greater Glasgow Community and Mental Health NHS Trust	Yes	
Southern General Hospital NHS Trust		Yes
Stobhill NHS Trust		Yes
Victoria Infirmary NHS Trust		Yes
West Glasgow Hospitals University NHS Trust		Yes
The Yorkhill NHS Trust		Yes
Highland Health Board	Yes	
Caithness and Sutherland NHS Trust		Yes
Highland Communities NHS Trust		Yes
Raigmore Hospital NHS Trust	Yes	
Lanarkshire Health Board	Yes	
Hairmyres and Stonehouse Hospitals NHS Trust	Yes	
Lanarkshire Healthcare NHS Trust		Yes
Law Hospital NHS Trust	Yes	
Monklands and Bellshill Hospitals NHS Trust	Yes	
Lothian Health	Yes	
East and Midlothian NHS Trust		Yes
Edinburgh Healthcare NHS Trust		Yes
Edinburgh Sick Children's NHS Trust		Yes
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh NHS Trust		Yes
West Lothian NHS Trust	Yes	
Western General Hospitals NHS Trust	Yes	
Orkney Health Board	Yes	
Orkney Health Unit	Yes	
Shetland Health Board	Yes	
Shetland Hospitals and Community Services Unit	Yes	
Tayside Health Board	Yes	
Angus NHS Trust	Yes	
Dundee Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
Dundee Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust	Yes	
Perth and Kinross Healthcare NHS Trust	Yes	
Western Isles Health Board	Yes	

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if full use of the NHSnet requires *(a)* GP practices and *(b)* NHS trusts connected to the NHSnet to have compatible software and hardware; and which companies have supplied the hardware and software for the project. [65763]

Mr. Galbraith: NHSnet provides a UK-wide secure private telecommunications network for NHS Organisations across the UK under contracts with BT, BT Syntegra and Cable and Wireless. Connection to NHSnet is achieved by connecting to a Service Access Point on the NHSnet. NHS organisations can either connect directly to an NHSnet Service Access Point or indirectly if they are already linked to a network, e.g. a private Health Board wide network, with a gateway connection to NHSnet. All networks (whether single GP Practices or Board level private networks) connecting to NHSnet must conform to the NHSnet Code of Connection which maintains the security and integrity of NHSnet.

Full use of NHSnet requires each GP Practice and NHS Trust (or the local network to which they belong) to meet published standards for NHSnet which comply with the Internet suite protocols (IP). GP Practices and NHS Trusts must therefore have systems which are compatible with NHSnet (but not necessarily the same as each other). A variety of suppliers will have supplied parts of the overall network; details of these are not held centrally.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects all GP practices in Scotland to have a link to the NHSnet; what resources have been allocated to this project *(a)* this year and *(b)* in each of the next three financial years; what resources will be required to (i) complete and (ii) support this service; and what is the estimated cost saving over the next five years. [65760]

Mr. Galbraith: 97 per cent. of GP practices are already connected and the remaining practices which asked to participate will be linked by March 1999. The total cost of this project was £7 million of which £0.415 million was spent in 1998–99. Resources required for ongoing support of the installed systems and NHSnet connections will be met through the usual arrangements between Health Boards and GPs for reimbursement of expenses.

It is difficult at this stage to estimate the cost saving when the system is fully utilised. The main objective is to improve patient care through ensuring that clinicians have access to the information they need to care for patients wherever they are in the NHSiS. The benefits expected when the full infrastructure is put into place also include savings in costs and reductions in the bureaucracy of sending an estimated 10 million paper forms around the system each year, saving in staff time, and improved convenience for patients.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many and what percentage of GP practices are currently connected to the NHSnet. [65761]

Mr. Galbraith: My most recent information is that 1,040 GP Practices are now connected to the NHSnet. This represents 97 per cent. of all practices in Scotland. Of the remaining 34 practices, 9 practices did not ask to participate and the remainder will be linked by March.

Psychiatrists (Young People)

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many child psychiatrists are currently employed in the NHS in Scotland. [65879]

Mr. Galbraith: The number of consultant child and adolescent psychiatrists employed in the NHS in Scotland at 30 September 1998 was as follows:

Whole time equivalent: 41.3

Headcount: 48

Notes:

1. Data available do not distinguish between staff working in child psychiatry and adolescent psychiatry.
2. Information on junior staff not yet available for 1998.
3. Consultant data for 30 September 1998 are the latest available and are provisional.

Source:

Information and Statistics Division Scotland.

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the availability of psychiatric services for young people, with particular reference to rural areas. [65878]

Mr. Galbraith: Within the context of their mental health strategies, all Health Boards in Scotland are determining and putting in place the appropriate levels of in-patient and community-based provision they require to meet assessed needs for child and adolescent psychiatric care.

The growth of community-based psychiatric services should help promote better access for young people in rural areas. But, inevitably, in-patient facilities will tend to be close to population centres. Health Boards covering rural areas should take account of this in developing their plans.

Quigley Committee

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will state the terms of reference of the Quigley Committee on higher education; and when he expects it to report; [65476]

(2) if he will make a statement on the interim findings of the Quigley Committee on student applications. [65475]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *138*.

The Quigley Committee has not made any statement of interim findings.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those areas for which *(a)* the New Deal Gateway and *(b)* one or more New Deal options are delivered entirely by private sector providers; and if he will list monthly expenditure and client outcomes for each of these private sector providers up to the latest date for which the figures are available. [63275]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* There are no areas where the New Deal Gateway is delivered entirely by private sector providers although in ten Units of Delivery the New Deal is private sector led. These are: Leicester, Colchester, West Lancashire, Exeter and East Devon, South Humber, North Tyneside, Forth Valley, Hackney and City, Solihull and Bridgend. Client outcomes for these are shown in the table. These figures are GSS from January to October 1998 and provisional Management Information for November 1998.

	Unsubsidised placings	*Number joining the Employment Option*
Leicester	413	27
Colchester	376	19
West Lancashire	84	12
Exeter and Devon	234	32
South Humber	539	4
North Tyneside	130	42
Forth Valley	226	66
Hackney and City	460	35
Solihull	93	19
Bridgend	317	151

Whilst I am unable, for reasons of commercial confidentiality, to provide details of payments to individual contractors, we will be reporting later this year on the overall financial performance of all Units of Delivery, including these ten private sector led areas as part of our continuous improvement agenda. This will include as a core performance measure the unit cost of placing a New Deal client into a job in each of the Units of Delivery.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the Unit of Delivery covering Havant Borough Council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [66367]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures for the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Unit of Delivery, which covers Havant, show that to the end of October 1998 (a) 1,229 young people had entered the Gateway and 217 had secured unsubsidised employment (b) 307 had joined one of the four options: 49 on the Employment option; 35 on the Voluntary Sector option; 10 on the Environment Task Force; and 213 on the Full-Time Education and Training option. 506 young people were still at the initial stage of New Deal support through Gateway, 32 had left New Deal to claim other benefits, 33 had gone to other known destinations and 134 had gone to unknown destinations.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the Unit of Delivery covering the New Forest District Council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [66368]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures for the Southampton and South West Hampshire Unit of Delivery, which covers the New Forest, show that to the end of October 1998 (a) 820 young people had entered the Gateway and 162 had secured unsubsidised employment (b) 178 had joined one of the four options: 37 on the Employment option; 25 on the Voluntary Sector option; 18 on the Environment Task Force; and 98 on the Full-Time Education and Training option. 316 young people were still at the initial stage of New Deal support through Gateway, 27 had left New Deal to claim other benefits, 32 had gone to other known destinations and 105 had gone to unknown destinations.

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young unemployed people aged 18 to 25 years in Doncaster, Central have to date gained new skills from their participation in the New Deal programme. [66562]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Statistics from the New Deal are not available for individual constituencies.

The latest Government Statistical figures to the end of October 1998, including the provisional Management Information to the end of November 1998, show that for the Wakefield and Doncaster Unit of Delivery, which covers the Doncaster Central area, 3,015 young people aged between 18–24 have already entered the New Deal Gateway. 961 young people have joined one of the four options and each participant on a New Deal option will work towards an NVQ or equivalent qualification which will assist them in gaining a new skill and increasing their prospects for sustainable employment.

Outdoor Education

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the subject of outdoor education; what changes he proposes to make in the provision and funding of such education; and if he will make a statement. [66485]

Ms Estelle Morris: Under the new maintained school funding system which takes effect from April 1999, local education authorities will be able to retain funding centrally to support outdoor education centres, as they have been able to do under present arrangements for Local Management of Schools. This reflects representations from Local Education Authorities and others following the publication last year of the consultation paper "Fair Funding".

The Government is also committed to increasing the range of opportunities that young people have to take part in learning activities outside school hours. To this end, we are making £180 million of Lottery money available across the UK through the New Opportunities Fund to support such activities. The draft application guidance produced by the New Opportunities Fund includes adventurous outdoor activities among those which may be eligible for funding. The New Opportunities Fund will be formally inviting applications later in the Spring.

School Performance

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what conclusions he has drawn from his Department's internal investigations of the relationship between socio-economic factors and school performance; and if he will place a copy of results of these investigations in the Library. [66602]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* Historically, there has been a strong statistical relationship between socio-economic factors and school performance. This does not mean, however, that poverty can be used to excuse poor results.

The Autumn Package of performance data, which was distributed in November last year, contains detailed information on national results and the performance of schools within similar bands of Free School Meals. The Package shows what is possible: many schools in the highest Free School Meals band can be seen to perform better than some of the schools in the lowest band.

The Government are committed to raising standards in all schools. For example, we are ensuring that successful schools better share good practice. The beacon school initiative and the new Standards Site on the Internet encourage and enable schools to learn about "what works", regardless of the socio-economic context in which individual schools are located.

We have placed a copy of the Autumn Package in the Library. It is also available via the Internet. The address is: http://www.standards.dfee.gov.uk/library/publications.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what plans he has to introduce quality assurance procedures within Section 11-funded adult education; [66608]

(2) what guidance he has issued to local education authorities relating to the means by which existing Section 11-funded adult education will be protected following the introduction of ethnic minority achievement grants; [66610]

(3) if he will ensure that, within the new administrative arrangements for ethnic minority achievement grants, the level of existing funding of adult education within each participating local education authority is ring-fenced before the retained and devolved proportions of the authority's allocations are set. [66609]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department's letter of 12 November 1998 to Chief Education Officers set out details of the new Standards Fund Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant. Subject to the receipt of good action plans, local education authorities will receive broadly the same allocations for the support of ethnic minority education in 1999–2000 as the Home Office provided under section 11 in 1998–99, including that element for adult education.

The Department's letter also set out the arrangements whereby up to 15 per cent. of allocations, or £150,000 whichever was the greater, might be held back to provide central services including adult education. This should be satisfactory for the vast majority of Authorities. However, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will consider carefully, and on their merits, any cases which an Authority might make reflecting historically heavy investment in adult education.

LEAs are required to ensure that all Standards Fund grants are spent for the purpose for which they are paid and to monitor the quality of provision. In addition, the Department monitors and evaluates all Standards Fund expenditure.

Teachers (Unfair Discrimination)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to the letter of 27 August (EM CC/614/2044) to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what interim results he has received in respect of the non-statutory code of practice on unfair discrimination on grounds of age in the teaching profession. [65404]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The draft Code of Practice we have been developing with key external partners was published for wider consultation, including amongst those with responsibilities for the employment of teachers, in November 1998. We were very pleased with the wide interest the Code prompted, with over 9,000 copies being distributed. The consultation ended on 8 January 1999 and we are currently analysing the responses. The analysis will be published in due course and the final version of the Code will be launched in the Spring.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if, pursuant to the answer given to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *152*, he will state *(a)* the assumptions about the growth of the minimum income guarantee relative to prices and earnings and *(b)* the number and proportion of state second pensioners who will be receiving the pensioners' minimum income guarantee in the years up to 2050. [66469]

Mr. Timms: Information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

It is assumed that, from the announced rates for April 1999, the Minimum Income Guarantee is uprated in line with the growth in average earnings (assumed to be 1.5 per cent. per year more than the growth in prices).

Estimates are not available of the number of pensioners who would be receiving payments of state second pension in future years. Overall, estimates taken from the PENSIM model suggest that under the new insurance contract for pensions approximately 1 in 4 pensioner units (2.5 million) would receive income from the Minimum Income Guarantee in 2050, and a lower proportion in years after 2050.

Projections forward to the year 2050 are subject to a high degree of uncertainty, given the number of assumptions in making them. Some of those who will be pensioners in 2050 have yet to begin work, and most are today in their 20s and 30s.

Estimates made by extrapolating projections from the PENSIM model can give only a broad indication of the likely order of magnitude of figures so far into the future.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the savings in income support or minimum pensioner income guarantee payments each year after 1 April 1999 till 1 April 2007 arising from the introduction of pensions splitting. [66462]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

Legislation to enable pensions to be shared at the time of divorce will be included in the forthcoming Welfare Reform Bill.

The financial implications of pension sharing are uncertain, and will depend on the number of spouses who obtain a pension share and the percentage of pension which is transferred. Current estimates are based on the assumption that there could be from 35,000 to 65,000 cases per year, with a central assumption of 50,000. All estimates made are also dependent on a large number of other assumptions and should be considered illustrative.

It is expected that any impact on the minimum income guarantee will initially be small, as income support entitlement will not be altered until a pension share comes into payment. As most divorces take place before the age of 40, it is likely that, in most cases, there will be a significant time lapse between a pension share being made and income being received from the pension. Broad estimates of the impact 20 years after implementation suggest that, using the central assumption of 50,000 pension shares per year, pension sharing on divorce could lead to a saving on all income related benefits of around £10 million (within a range of £0—£30 million using alternative assumptions).

Social Fund

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will extend Direction 25 of the Social Fund to include 16 to 18-year-olds who are on a youth training placement. [66156]

Angela Eagle: It is not appropriate to extend Direction 25 to include 16–18 year olds on youth training placements. Payments from the Discretionary Social Fund are made from a cash limited budget and available resources must be targeted on those most in need of help. Eligibility for Social Fund Community Care Grants is therefore restricted by Direction 25 to those entitled to Income Support or income based Jobseeker's Allowance.

Provision already exists to allow vulnerable 16–17 year olds to receive Income Support and income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and, in turn, access to Community Care Grants.

Disabled People

Mr. Osten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a copy of the responses his Department has received following the consultation process for the paper, "A New Contract for Welfare: Support for Disabled People". [66828]

Mr. Bayley: I refer the hon. Member to the Written Answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on 19 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 402.

DEFENCE

Portsmouth Naval Base

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what evaluation he has made of the use of space and the state of the equipment in COB2 building at the Portsmouth Naval Base. [66178]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Naval Bases and Supply Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from J. A. Trewby to Mr. Michael Hancock, dated 21 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Defence has asked me to reply to your Question on what evaluation he has made of the use of space and the state of the equipment in Central Office Block 2 (COB2) building at HM Naval Base Portsmouth, as this falls within my areas of responsibility.

COB2 is an office administration building. A study was completed in 1997 which showed that the building's usage conformed with Departmental Standards for space utilisation. The equipment in the building compromises of normal office equipment, ie. computers, telephones, and service equipment such as lifts and lights. These are regularly maintained and updated as requirements demand.

Submarines

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the displacement of the Vanguard class of submarines. [66172]

Mr. Spellar: The displacement of Vanguard class submarines, when submerged, is about 16,000 tons.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the anticipated hull life of the Trafalgar class of submarines. [66667]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The initial design life of Trafalgar class submarine hulls was 25 years, although there is sufficient margin to extend the life of the submarines as necessary, subject to monitoring to ensure the continuing safety of the submarines.

Project Horizon Ships

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the expected average time between major refits for Project Horizon ships. [66665]

Mr. Spellar: The maintenance philosophy for CNGF is based on a continuous process of repair and update. It is expected that the length of upkeep periods will be reduced, scheduled maintenance will be minimised, and the docking period will be extended to five years. There will be no major refits, but there will be four docking periods, of six months each, at five year intervals during the planned 25 year life of the ship.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66204]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 4, to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

Uranium

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations his Department has received requesting the use of its uranium stocks for cancer research, with particular reference to the detection and treatment of cancer; what response his Department gave; and what factors underlay this response. [66487]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The Department of Trade and Industry asked my Department last year if we could provide highly enriched uranium, HEU, from defence stocks for use by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) to produce medical radioisotopes.

UK defence requirements for HEU were considered in detail in the Strategic Defence Review, which concluded that any material not required for nuclear weapons purposes would be needed for the nuclear propulsion programme. Therefore, as we stated in the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) White Paper, the MOD holds no surplus stocks of HEU. We were, as a result unable to accede to the Department of Trade and Industry's request. We were, however, able to provide advice on a possible alternative source of HEU.

Codes of Conduct

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he intends to publish a revised code of conduct on ethics and discipline for the Royal Air Force; [66746]

(2) when he intends to publish a revised code of conduct on ethics and discipline for the Army; [66747]

(3) when he intends to publish a revised code of conduct on ethics and discipline for the Royal Navy. [66748]

Mr. Doug Henderson: As I explained in my previous answer on 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 269, each of the Services has its own procedure for providing information and guidance on matters relating to conduct and discipline within its individual Service environment. The Army and the Royal Air Force are currently revising and updating their current codes of conduct. When this work is complete, I will write the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

There are no immediate plans to publish a revised code of conduct for the Royal Navy.

Outstanding Compensation Cases

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many outstanding legal cases are pending against his Department on grounds of *(a)* equal opportunities, *(b)* racial discrimination, *(c)* homosexuality and lesbianism, *(d)* post-traumatic stress syndrome and *(e)* physical injury. [66743]

Mr. Spellar: The available information requested relating to the number of outstanding compensation cases being pursued against my Department, whether in litigation or not, by employees, former employees and members of the public as at 20 January 1999 is set out:

	Number
(a) Sex discrimination, sexual harassment and equal pay claims submitted by Service and former Service personnel to Employment Tribunals	[1]38
(b) Racial discrimination and harassment claims submitted by Service and former Service personnel to Employment Tribunals	[1]16
(c) Homosexuality and lesbianism cases submitted by Service and former Service personnel to Employment Tribunals	[1]72
(d) Post-traumatic stress disorder	155
(e) Physical injury	[2]3,716

[1] These figures exclude claims from MOD civilian and former civilian staff as the information is not held centrally.
[2] This figure excludes personal injury claims from members of the public being handled by MOD claims officers overseas as the information is not held centrally. Medical negligence claims and third party personal injury claims relating to road traffic accidents have also been excluded. Claims in respect of disease (e.g. asbestosis, mesothelioma) have been included but claims relating to psychiatric illness have been excluded.

HMS Invincible

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the interval between major refits for HMS Invincible. [66666]

Mr. Doug Henderson: HMS Invincible has undergone one refit. It took place some six years after she entered service with the Royal Navy.

RAF Manston, Kent

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what occasions RAF Manston, Kent, has been used by private freight aircraft in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998; what cargo they carried; and if he will make a statement. [66629]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* My Department does not record the information requested. Kent International Airport (KIA), a private company, operates from an enclave of leased land within the airfield site of RAF Manston and is responsible for all flight planning, acceptance of aircraft movements, handling and refuelling, loading and unloading.

Chief of Defence Personnel

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to establish the post of Chief of Defence Personnel. [66744]

Mr. George Robertson: I have no current plans to establish a post of Chief of Defence Personnel.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the net effect of the review of the Territorial Army on the number of *(a)* TA centres and *(b)* TA units in North Wales. [66017]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Prior to the Strategic Defence Review there were seven Territorial Army Centres and five Territorial Army company-sized units in North Wales, plus a battalion Headquarters. As a result of the re-structuring there will be five Territorial Army Centres and four Territorial Army company-sized Units, plus a battalion Headquarters.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of the strength of the TA prior to the Strategic Defence Review will remain after implementation of the Strategic Defence Review in *(a)* the North West of England and *(b)* North Wales. [65023]

Mr. Doug Henderson: 75 per cent. of TA strength will remain in the North West after the implementation of the findings of the Strategic Defence Review. 72 per cent. will remain in North Wales.

Atomic Test Veterans

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will commission a re-assessment of the work of Dr Sue Rabbitt Roff, at the centre for medical education at Dundee University, on the causation of cancers in British atomic test veterans. [66431]

Mr. Spellar: No. My Department has made clear on a number of occasions its reservations about the work of Ms Rabbitt Roff and the conclusions reached. Nevertheless, consideration is being given to researching further the incidence of multiple myeloma among our nuclear test veterans and we have asked Ms Rabbitt Roff for access to her data. Any such research will be carried out by the National Radiological Protection Board but the results, which would be subject to external peer review, would be unlikely to be available until the latter half of next year.

101 Battalion REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consultations his Department had with North West and Isle of Man TAVRA on the move of HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry. [65012]

Mr. Doug Henderson: North West and Isle of Man TAVRA were consulted on the move of Headquarters 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry during the consultation process which took place at Headquarters Land Command in October.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *54*, concerning the cost of transferring 101 REME Battalion HQ, if he will define significant financial costs. [65016]

Mr. Doug Henderson: These are costs of an order likely to influence the decision to relocate the unit.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Dome (Sponsorship)

36. Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the total amount of sponsorship which he forecasts will be available for the Dome. [65228]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company's target is to raise £150 million of sponsorship support. The Company announced, last November, confirmed sponsorship of £120 million—or 80 per cent. of that total. The NMEC are in detailed negotiations for a further £15 million.

Festival Fund

37. Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will ensure that there is sufficient help and advice from the millennium festival on funding applications for regional and local events and activities to the Millennium Festival fund. [65229]

Janet Anderson: The Millennium Festival is a partnership initiative between the Lottery Distribution bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the New Millennium Experience Company. It aims to give as many people as possible financial and other support for events and activities within their communities during 2000. Promotional and administrative support for the Festival is provided by NMEC's twelve country-wide offices. Staff in those offices are available to advise anyone who is interested in the Millennium Festival and I have today placed contact details in the Libraries of the House.

The funding round for larger awards—over £5,000—which opened on 5 May 1998 has now closed. Decisions on the Awards will be announced in February 1999. The funding round for smaller community schemes—seeking between £250 and £5,000—will open in the spring of 1999.

Ferry Passengers

38. Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of people who will travel to the Millennium Dome by ferry. [65230]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company estimates that about 1 million out of the estimated 12 million visitors to the Dome will arrive by boat from central London and by the shuttle service from historic Greenwich.

Visitors

40. Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the maximum number of visitors which the millennium site could handle on any one day. [65232]

Janet Anderson: Actual daily numbers will depend on the New Millennium Experience Company's policy regarding the number of tickets on sale for each day, on visitor safety and comfort, and on necessary approvals from the relevant authorities. The present estimate is for a maximum of 35,000 on those occasions when the Millennium Experience opens during daytime; on those occasions where the Millennium Experience is open during the daytime and the evening, the number of visitors is estimated at 55,000.

42. Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his most recent estimate of the number of daily visitors to the dome and the proportion of the visitors who will arrive by underground train service. [65234]

Janet Anderson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) on 21 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *532*. The number of visitors estimated to arrive at the Dome site by underground train is about 55 per cent.

National Lottery

41. Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of the total public and national lottery expenditure on the millennium celebrations will be spent on the dome at Greenwich. [65233]

Janet Anderson: The Millennium Commission has awarded a grant of £449 million (gross) to the Millennium Experience project, which incorporates the Dome at Greenwich and a linked comprehensive programme of events and activities around the country. This represents 20 per cent. of the Millennium Commission's total funds. The remaining 80 per cent. has been distributed to a wide range of projects around the UK. The New Millennium Experience Company has received, and will receive, no public funds from the Exchequer for the project.

Sponsorship

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received on sponsorship of the Millennium Experience. [65231]

Janet Anderson: As shareholder of the New Millennium Experience Company, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, received many representations from members of the public and from Members of this House about all aspects of the Millennium Experience project, including sponsorship.

Millennium Landmark Projects

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been paid out to date for each of the Millennium Landmark projects. [66672]

Mr. Chris Smith: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I shall write to the hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66208]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

Hotels (Rating System)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what account is given of value for money in the accreditation of crowns on a quality rating system for hotels. [66896]

Janet Anderson: Rating assessments under both the English Tourist Board's current crown scheme and the new harmonised accommodation rating scheme are made on the range of facilities and level of services appropriate to each type of accommodation and not specifically on their value for money. Under the new harmonised scheme for serviced accommodation in England, hotels are given a rating of 1 to 5 stars covering the whole visitor experience (e.g. quality, level of services and range of facilities) and guest accommodation is rated entirely on quality, using 1 to 5 diamonds. The ETB, the AA and the RAC are currently carrying out inspections against the new harmonised scheme, which will be launched to customers later this year.

Tourism (North West)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the annual revenue of the tourism industry in the North West for the last five years. [66898]

Janet Anderson: Estimated figures for annual expenditure in the North West Tourist Board region from 1993 to 1997 by tourists from the UK staying at least one night and by tourists from overseas are shown in the table. Figures for spending by UK residents on tourism day visits to the North West Tourist Board region are available only for 1996 and show an estimated £2,800 million for that year (Source: the UK Day Visits Survey).

£ million

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Domestic tourism	860	995	1,060	1,020	1,000
Tourism from overseas	287	371	331	381	455
Total (rounded)	1,147	1,366	1,391	1,401	1,455

Sources:
UK Tourism Survey (domestic tourism), International Passenger Survey (tourism from overseas).

North West Tourist Board

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the value of the North West Tourist Board. [65988]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* My Department has made no specific assessment of the North West Tourist Board, which, like the other regional tourist boards, is an independent commercial organisation. However, I fully recognise the important work that the Board does to promote, develop and raise the profile of tourism in its region. I am pleased to say that I am opening the Great Days Out Fair in Bolton on 20 February.

Football Task Force

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will extend the terms of reference of the Football Task Force to allow it to investigate the administration of professional football. [65061]

Mr. Banks: I expect the governing bodies to address issues relating to the administration of professional football and I urge them to take an early opportunity to review current structures and procedures. The Football Task Force has provided valuable advice in a number of

reports and I will give careful consideration to any arrangements that may follow the conclusion of its original remit.

TREASURY

Transport Companies (Millennium Insurance)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the ability of transport companies to obtain insurance cover to operate services on 1 January 2000; and if he will make a statement. [65217]

Ms Hewitt: None.

Paymaster General

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the changes made to the responsibilities of the Paymaster General since publication of the list of Ministerial Responsibilities in October 1998. [64490]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The Paymaster General, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo) has a portfolio with responsibilities which include the Inland Revenue, Customs and Excise, tax and the Finance Bill.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

United Kingdom Overseas Territories

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to publish his White Paper on the United Kingdom overseas territories; and if he will make a statement. [66625]

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he intends to publish the White Paper on British Overseas Territories. [66697]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We expect that the White Paper will be published soon.

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) when a representative of the British Embassy in Yemen first met with a member of the Yemeni Government to discuss the five detained British citizens; [66686]

(2) what representations were made to the Yemeni Government between the kidnapping of the hostages on 28 December and their death on 29 December; and what response was received from the Yemeni Government. [66688]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement given to the House by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 11 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 21–34.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when *(a)* he and *(b)* a Foreign and Commonwealth Office minister first spoke to a member of the Yemeni Government to discuss the situation in Yemen. [66687]

Mr. Fatchett: *(a)* My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary first discussed events in Yemen by phone with the Yemeni Prime Minister, Dr. Iriyani, on 9 January. *(b)* The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), called on the Yemeni Ambassador on 1 January.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of Yemen's application to join the Commonwealth. [66689]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: At their meeting in Edinburgh in October 1997, Commonwealth Heads of Government decided to keep Yemen's application to join the Commonwealth under review.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans his Department's ministers have to visit Yemen. [66690]

Mr. Fatchett: We have no current plans to visit Yemen.

Gibraltar (Spanish Fishing Boats)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to send a fisheries protection vessel to Gibraltar to reinforce the protection of British waters from unlawful incursions by Spanish fishing boats. [66246]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* This situation remains under review. The deployment of a fisheries protection vessel, to aid in calming the situation in British waters around Gibraltar, remains one of a number of options we are considering.

Chechnya

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) when the British Embassy in Moscow learnt of the Interfax report of 6 December 1998 that a rescue attempt was to be made to release the hostages in Chechnya, employed by Granger Telecom; [66958]

(2) when his Department in London learned of the BBC World Service report from the Caversham Monitoring Service that Interfax had reported that a rescue attempt was to be made to release the hostages in Chechnya employed by Granger Telecom. [66959]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: On 7 December 1998, HM Embassy Moscow saw the Interfax news agency dispatch reporting Chechen assertions that the men were being held outside Chechnya and that Russian law-enforcement agencies might try to rescue the hostages.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the advice he has placed in the Library in respect of people travelling to Chechnya was issued to individual visa applicants employed by Granger Telecom or was issued to the company that employed them. [66960]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The FCO travel advice for Russia, now in the Library, was shown to Granger Telecom management at a meeting with FCO officials on 21 August 1998. Granger Telecom have confirmed to FCO officials that, as a result of that meeting and the

advice given, Granger management re-consulted their staff about their willingness to work in Chechnya. The FCO was not made aware of individual visa applications to the Russian Embassy.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the advice given to travellers visiting Chechnya is the same as that given to people intending to work there. [66961]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Since 7 December 1994, we have advised British nationals not to travel to Chechnya. The travel advice is the same for visiting travellers and for British people intending to work there.

Iran

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what requests he has received from the Government of Iran for compensation for a stray missile which landed in or near the Iranian city of Khorramshahr. [65400]

Mr. Fatchett: We have received a request for compensation from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran in respect of a stray missile that landed in or near the town of Khorramshahr.

No missiles were fired by UK forces in the course of Operation Desert Fox. Questions relating to the circumstances of individual missile attacks and any subsequent claims for compensation are therefore a question for the US authorities.

European Communities Working Groups

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many reports were submitted by European Communities working groups during the United Kingdom presidency; and if he will list them. [66374]

Ms Quin: During the UK Presidency approximately 6,700 documents with official document numbers were submitted by working groups. As agreed during our Presidency, from 1 January 1999, details of all documents will be listed on the Council's website, at http://ue.eu.int.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many working groups have been established at European Community level; what is the average number of meetings held each year; if he will list the 20 groups which met most frequently over 1998; and if he will indicate the level of United Kingdom participation at each of them. [66364]

Ms Quin: In 1998, 262 working groups met in Brussels, and a total of 2,138 meetings were held. The level of UK participation at each working group varied according to the subject discussed. According to the Council Secretariat, the twenty working groups which met most frequently were:

Enlargement, Orient and Central Asia, Central Europe, Mashrak/Maghreb, Development, Oceania, Latin America, Balkans, CFSP Counsellors, Friends of the Presidency, Budgetary, Structural Actions, Financial Questions, Jurist Linguists, Environment, Social Questions, Telecoms, Research, Agriculture, Vetinary.

European Commission

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the age of the target audience for the European Commission booklet, "The Raspberry Ice Cream War"; what was the aim of the booklet; how many copies have been distributed in the EU; and if he will make a statement. [66393]

Ms Quin: The European Commission booklet "The Raspberry Ice-Cream War" was written for young people. The aim of the booklet was to explain the advantages of European co-operation in the form of an adventure story. Information on how many copies have been distributed in the EU is not available.

Franco-German Summit

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the implications for the United Kingdom of the resolution at the Franco-German meeting at Potsdam to establish a binational working group on national sovereignty. [66344]

Ms Quin: We are not aware of any such resolution at the Franco-German Summit in Potsdam. The joint declaration issued at the end made no reference to it.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecutors

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Attorney-General what are the salary bands for the Chief Crown Prosecutor for London and for each of the CPS areas. [66573]

The Attorney-General: The salary bands for the 42 Chief Crown Prosecutor posts are linked to the likely job dimension. Relevant factors include anticipated caseload, budget responsibility and numbers of staff. The table sets out in relation to each of the 42 Areas the relevant pay band, together with the estimated bracket for caseload, budget and staff numbers.

Chief Crown Prosecutors: Job dimensions

Area	*Salary range*	*Likely job dimensions*
Band 5		
London	£54,230–90,400	Budget: £50m+ Staff numbers: 800+ Total caseload: 200,000+
Band 4		
Greater Manchester West Midlands West Yorkshire	£49,130–80,400	Budget: £10–15m Staff numbers: 200–300 Total caseload: 65,000–100,000
Band 3		
Merseyside Lancashire Northumbria South Wales Hampshire	£44,560–71,470	Budget: £6–10m Staff numbers: 140–200 Total caseload: 40,000–65,000
Band 2		
Thames Valley South Yorkshire Devon & Cornwall Kent Nottinghamshire Avon & Somerset Essex Cheshire	£40,430–63,490	Budget: £2.5–7m Staff numbers: 65–140 Total caseload: 20,000–50,000

Chief Crown Prosecutors: Job dimensions

Area	*Salary range*	*Likely job dimensions*
Staffordshire		
Leicestershire		
West Mercia		
Sussex		
Humberside		
Derbyshire		
Cleveland		
Band 1		
North Yorkshire	£33,456–54,323	Budget: £1–3.5m
Hertfordshire		Staff numbers: 30–65
North Wales		Total caseload: 9,000–20,000
Norfolk		
Gwent		
Dyfed-Powys		
Northamptonshire		
Surrey		
Cambridgeshire		
Dorset		
Durham		
Cumbria		
Bedfordshire		
Suffolk		
Gloucestershire		
Lincolnshire		
Wiltshire		
Warwickshire		

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Attorney-General if he will list the Chief Crown Prosecutors for London and the 42 police areas who are currently in post; and if he will list those areas where appointments have not yet been made. [66574]

The Attorney-General: An open competition is at present in progress to select a Chief Crown Prosecutor for each of the proposed 42 CPS areas. Following advertisement in the national and legal press in the week commencing 16 November 1998, a selection board is at present interviewing those candidates selected for interview. Appointments will be offered to the successful candidates at the conclusion of this process and they will be invited to take up their posts in April 1999.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Overseas Telephone Calls

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee if he will list the *(a)* average annual expenditure on overseas telephone calls per hon. Member and *(b)* greatest amount spent by an hon. Member in each of the last three years for which information is available; and what the annual administrative cost is of collecting payment for these calls. [66567]

Mr. Allan: The average annual expenditure for hon. Members for overseas calls for 1998 was £29.31. The greatest amount spent by an hon. Member in the preceding three years is £127.31 (1996), £403.51 (1997) and £1,289.90 (1998). The annual administrative cost of collecting payment for these calls is estimated to be £13,000 (excluding any administrative costs incurred by the Member).

PRIME MINISTER

Cross-party Co-operation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of involving hon. Members from the Liberal Democrat Party in the development of Government policy on matters relating to access to the countryside. [66404]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *483–84*.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his letter of 13 January to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what was the outcome of discussions with *(a)* EU partners and *(b)* Security Council colleagues about making more effective arrangements for alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people. [66491]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* Discussions are still continuing with EU partners on all aspects of Iraq policy, including ways to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people, on which we have made a number of proposals to the Presidency. The General Affairs Council will consider these matters further on 25 January. Following discussions in the Security Council on 14 January, the President of the Council reported that members had discussed the need to improve the humanitarian programme and looked forward to a full report from the UN Secretary General on how this might be achieved.

However, it is important that these issues are put into context. Saddam Hussein has proven time and again that he is not prepared to provide adequately for his people's welfare. He has refused shipments of humanitarian aid, prevaricated over distribution plans for the "oil for food" programme, smuggled oil illegally out of Iraq for his own benefit and tried to sell wheat and barley to other countries at low prices, while complaining that his people are starving. The UN Special Rapporteur holds Baghdad responsible for the precarious food and health situation in Iraq. We are determined to do what we can to ease the suffering of the Iraqi people in the face of such neglect by their leader.

Government Agencies

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy that Government agencies which choose not to pay costs ordered by a court at the end of a case must report the detailed circumstances and the reasons for any refusal to his office. [66872]

The Prime Minister: Government agencies are bound by Orders of the Court in the same way as any other litigant and have the same remedies available to them. Where they are aggrieved by an Order or are advised that the Order was incorrectly made, their remedy is to appeal against the Order or to apply to the Court to have the Order set aside. Otherwise, they must obey the Order.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Package Holidays

6. **Ann Keen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made in improving protection for consumers buying package holidays. [65195]

Dr. Howells: Overall, the Package Travel Regulations 1992 are serving consumers well. Around 30 million holiday and travel packages are sold in this country each year, and produce relatively few problems. However, I am keeping the effectiveness of the Regulations under review and will not hesitate to act if necessary.

The Foreign Package Holidays (Tour Operators and Travel Agents) Order which came into force on 16 November 1998 will help consumers to shop around to get the best deals.

Parental Leave

12. **Judy Mallaber:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is proposing to provide rights for employees to take parental leave. [65202]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We expect to introduce a Bill shortly which will create the framework for a package of measures implementing our family-friendly employment proposals. All of these measures will help employees to balance work and family life and bring about a culture in the workplace which will support employees wanting to take parental leave. The measures in the Bill will be supported by regulations setting out the detailed provisions.

The package will introduce three months parental leave, enabling fathers, as well as mothers, to play an active role in raising their children and helping to encourage a workplace culture where it is acceptable for them to do so. And the Bill will recognise for the first time, the need for adoptive parents and their children to spend vital time together adjusting to their new circumstances.

Parental leave builds on the maternity leave rights. Women, and their families, will benefit from the extension of basic maternity leave to 18 weeks, and from the reduction in the qualifying period for the longer period of maternity absence.

The new right to time off to deal with family emergencies will allow people to take short-term time off to deal with emergencies without jeopardising their job security. It will apply to all employees and is a significant step which recognises that caring responsibilities may affect people at all stages of their working life.

Libya

13. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on trade with Libya. [65203]

Mr. Wilson: Until we see actual progress in our political relations with Libya, my Department's position remains unchanged. We neither encourage nor discourage trade.

Engineering Industry

14. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to safeguard jobs in the engineering industry; and if he will make a statement. [65204]

Mr. Byers: The slowdown in the world economy will lead to slower growth in the United Kingdom.

We believe that the best way of safeguarding jobs in the long term in the engineering industry is to create a stable and strong monetary and fiscal regime.

Post Office

15. **Mr. Stringer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policies for making the Post Office internationally competitive. [65205]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The elements of the Post Office reform package—a combination of market disciplines and commercial freedoms—aimed at transforming the performance of the Post Office and its ability to carry out business both nationally and internationally—are set out in the Statement made by my right hon. Friend the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–24.

The first fruit of our new policy has been Government approval for the Post Office's first major foreign strategic acquisition. The acquisition of German Parcel will significantly enhance the international parcels capability of the Post Office.

28. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on the future of the Post Office. [65220]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The statement of this House on the future of the Post Office on 7 December 1998 by my right hon. Friend, the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry followed representations from and consultations with interested parties. These included the Post Office, Post Office Unions, the Post Office Users National Council, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, representatives of business users and potential and existing competitors.

We also took full account of the Trade and Industry Select Committee's 1998 Report on the Post Office (HC 380).

Single European Currency

16. **Mr. Laurence Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on literature advising companies on the single European currency issued by his Department. [65206]

Mr. Wilson: The Government have produced a number of publications and specialist information relating to the introduction of the single European currency. The Euro Preparations Unit in HM Treasury has published a series of factsheets to help small and medium businesses prepare for the euro. To supplement this work, DTI has produced leaflets aimed specifically at exporters. My noble Friend, the Minister for Trade and Competitiveness in Europe wrote to 1.6 million small and medium companies last year to alert them to the need to prepare for the euro and to the information available from the Government.

Consumer Protection

17. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his work in protecting the consumers of goods and services in the UK. [65207]

Dr. Howells: We are taking forward a large number of measures aimed at improving the lot of consumers including work on clearer sale of goods rights, giving consumer bodies the right to seek injunctions against the use of unfair contract terms, increased transparency in pricing information by extending unit pricing, giving consumers clear rights when buying by mail order and other distance selling methods and strengthening consumer protection on doorstep selling.

At the same time we are working on a broader consumer strategy aimed at giving consumers a fair deal. It will concentrate on three key areas: ensuring that consumers know their rights and have the information they need to make informed choices and demand their rights; taking rogue traders out of the market; and taking measures to give consumers confidence when shopping on the internet.

South America

18. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps his Department is taking to maintain and increase exports to South America. [65208]

Mr. Wilson: My Department offers a full range of services to British companies seeking business in South America, including support for trade missions and trade fairs. Opportunities in the markets are extensively promoted throughout the United Kingdom, supported by Ministers, other Government Departments, Export Promoters seconded from the private sector and various private sector multiplier organisations. This is underpinned by visits to the region by various Government Ministers and by visits to this country by both Heads of Government and Ministers from Latin America.

Science (Women)

19. **Mrs. Butler:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the involvement of women in science. [65209]

Mr. Byers: Women are significantly under-represented in the physical sciences and engineering. Unless we can improve this situation, our industrial and research base will continue to be deprived of access to some of the best potential talent. We are encouraging young women to continue with science through A-levels into higher education, and are seeking to ensure that women can have satisfactory science and engineering-based careers, by encouraging family-friendly practices in both the public and private sectors.

Personal Pensions

20. **Ms Stuart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he has made in his discussions with the Social Security Department in relation to S226 personal pensions being available to trustees in bankruptcy. [65210]

Dr. Howells: Following those discussions the Government issued a Green Paper, "A new contract for welfare: Partnership in Pensions", which proposes that all tax-approved private pension rights should be treated equally on bankruptcy. A subsequent Consultation Paper, "Strengthening the Pensions Framework", set out that proposal in more detail.

We propose that in the future all tax-approved private pension rights should remain with bankrupts and not be available to the trustee in bankruptcy for the benefit of creditors. This will include tax-approved Section 226 Personal Pensions. But as a safeguard against abuse the trustee in bankruptcy will be able to apply for a court to recover any excessive contributions made to the pension scheme.

Regional Competitiveness

21. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has to improve regional competitiveness. [65211]

Mr. Byers: The White Paper, "Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge Driven Economy", which was published in December 1998, sets out new proposals to improve regional competitiveness. These include a refocused Regional Selective Assistance, new measures to support the growth of smaller businesses in selected areas, new regional venture capital funds and extra funds for the new Regional Development Agencies in England to address their regional competitiveness needs.

23. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he will ensure that his proposals for innovative start-ups from the public sector science and engineering base will enhance competitiveness in regional economies. [65213]

Mr. Byers: The Government are currently setting up new Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to enhance the competitiveness of the English regions. These will play an important role in encouraging innovation and the exploitation of our knowledge base. The help for innovative start-ups announced in the Competitiveness White Paper will be available through Business Links partnerships which will work closely with national and local partners to ensure the support they deliver meets regional needs.

Venture Capital

22. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he will take to encourage the growth of venture capital in the regions. [65212]

Mr. Byers: I recognise the vital role that venture capital can play in support of growth businesses and the value that the formal venture capital industry adds in making larger investments. I am committed to ensuring that there is also adequate supply of venture capital, in smaller amounts, to meet demand across the regions.

Scientific Discoveries

24. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to encourage commercial development of scientific discoveries. [65214]

Mr. Byers: The commercial exploitation of scientific research is fundamental to a prosperous knowledge-driven economy. The Competitiveness White Paper set out a number of important measures including:

- A new "Reach-out" fund to encourage universities to work more effectively with business;
- A £25 million Science Enterprise Challenge to create up to eight enterprise centres at UK universities;
- Expansion of activities to promote collaborative partnerships and the transfer of knowledge between the science and engineering base and businesses.
- A look at how to make the most of the outputs of Public Sector Research Establishments.

The White Paper announcements build on other activities such as the University Challenge launched last year to help universities turn good research into good business.

Minimum Wage

25. **Mr. Plaskitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on the national minimum wage. [65215]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have received a number of recent representations on the national minimum wage, both in response to its consultation on draft national minimum wage regulations and through general correspondence.

27. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those groups which he plans to exempt from the provisions relating to the minimum wage. [65219]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We have always made it clear that the national minimum wage should have the maximum possible application. The draft minimum wage regulations, upon which we consulted in autumn 1998, provided for the exemption of 16 and 17-year-olds, apprentices under the age of 26 in the first year of their apprenticeship and apprentices aged 18 in any year of their apprenticeship. We have given careful consideration to the responses we received during the consultation exercise and revised regulations will shortly be laid before Parliament.

Sub-post Offices

26. **Mrs. Organ:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future of the sub-post office network. [65216]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government remain firmly committed to a network of post offices throughout the country in which sub-post offices will continue to be the key element alongside a core of Post Office owned and managed Crown offices.

Competitiveness White Paper

29. **Ms Southworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on the Competitiveness White Paper. [65221]

Mr. Byers: My Department has received numerous representations from business and private individuals welcoming the wide-ranging programme to promote business competitiveness set out in the Competitiveness White Paper.

Ministerial Visits

30. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to make an official visit to *(a)* Brazil and *(b)* the USA in the next year. [65222]

Mr. Wilson: Proposals for overseas visits by the new Secretary of State, including Brazil, are still under discussion. There are provisional plans for the Secretary of State to visit the US in the Spring of 1999. The visit would be part of a continuing programme, building on the good working relationship we have with many American companies for the strategic alliances and joint ventures.

High-tech Industry

31. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has to improve the competitiveness of British high-tech industry. [65223]

Mr. Byers: The Government set out their agenda for helping to improve the competitiveness of the whole of British industry in the recently published White Paper "Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge Driven Economy". In the White Paper, we also recognised the need to look to the future, to those high-tech industries that have strong growth potential. This is why for example, as part of the Enterprise Fund announced in the White Paper, we are working with major financial institutions to set out a national venture capital fund to support very early-stage, high technology businesses. It is also why the Government in partnership with the Wellcome Trust will spend an additional £1.4 billion to modernise the science and engineering base and help fund leading edge research projects.

Interest Rates

32. **Mr. Fisher:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from business leaders in the last month on the level of UK interest rates. [65224]

Mr. Byers: Ministers regularly receive representations from business leaders on many aspects of economic performance, including the level of interest rates. Frequently we are told that one of the most important things the Government can do for business is to deliver economic stability. The Government have taken tough and decisive action to secure that much needed stability, including giving independence to the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England over interest rates. We shall support the Monetary Policy Committee in the difficult decisions they have to make.

Postal Service

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he will take to ensure that postal service users pay an affordable, uniform price for services wherever they use the service in the UK. [65196]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As my right hon. Friend the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry made clear in his Statement to this House on 7 December 1998 on the future of the Post Office, the Government remain committed to the Post Office being subject to a universal

service obligation. A uniform public tariff across the UK, regardless of delivery distance, will be maintained for those activities that fall within this obligation.

Nuclear Reprocessing Contracts

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will specify the procedures for recovery of losses incurred by BNFL on nuclear reprocessing contracts in the UK in the process of cancellation by German interests *(a)* under contract and *(b)* under inter-governmental agreements; if he will specify the amount of such losses; and if he will make a statement. [66836]

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Industry and I met the German Environment Minister, Juergen Trittin, on 20 January to discuss BNFL's reprocessing contracts with Germany.

We made clear to Mr. Trittin that the decision to phase out nuclear power was a matter for Germany herself to decide.

But we also stressed that the costs of that decision should not be borne by BNFL which had entered into legally binding contracts in good faith. It would be wrong for the company to suffer financially from a change in German policy over which they had no control. We also emphasised the point that the contracts would be determined under English law. BNFL are firmly of the view that the German utilities are under a clear contractual obligation.

We also made it clear that, if the 650 tonnes of German spent fuel in store at Sellafield were not to be reprocessed, then it would have to be returned to Germany. The UK will not act as a permanent storage depot for nuclear material. We were pleased to announce that Mr. Trittin agreed that a joint working group of UK and German officials be established to work out the practical details of returning the German material should this prove to be necessary.

Researchers

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the letter of 7 October 1998 from the Minister for Science to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what response he has had from OST to his request about taking forward specific projects recommended by Sir Gareth Roberts's report on researchers. [65408]

Mr. Battle: The Office of Science and Technology has been principally involved in work to restructure the membership of the Research Careers Initiative, as recommended in the report. It has also had informal discussions with a number of organisations, in particular to take forward the report's recommendations relating to provision of career guidance and training for researchers. I understand that a new RCI steering group will be meeting in the next few weeks to consider more specific actions.

Refrigerants

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the letter of 11 November (td-235–11) from the Minister for Energy and Industry to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what progress he has made in considering air products refrigeration systems using air as the coolant as an alternative to CFCs and other ozone-depleting refrigerants. [65407]

Mr. Battle: My officials have contacted Air Products Europe Inc. to obtain further information about the Closed Cycle Air Refrigeration (CCAR) system. Their response suggests that the current technology is not yet an economic proposition for domestic refrigeration, but has potential for specialised industrial and buildings applications such as large food storage facilities. The promotion of air cycle refrigeration is being addressed by 2 special interest groups set up with MAFF assistance at the Food Refrigeration and Process Engineering Research Centre at Bristol University, which has received UK and EU funding. Air Products have been in contact with the Centre and have given a presentation on the CCAR system.

Domestic Gas Appliances

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the regulations covering safety standards for domestic gas appliances. [65331]

Mr. Battle: The safety of new domestic gas appliances is controlled by the Gas Appliances (Safety) Regulations 1995, ("the Regulations") which implement into UK law the European Council's Gas Appliances Directive.

The Regulations contain "essential requirements" which manufacturers of gas appliances are required to meet. To ensure that gas appliances comply with these safety provisions, manufacturers are required to submit their product to a third-party Notified Body for type approval before it may be placed on the market. Manufacturers must also appoint a Notified Body to undertake periodic surveillance of the production process in order to ensure that the product continues to conform to the type that was originally approved.

Millennium Trade Round

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list Her Majesty's Government's objectives in the proposed Millennium Round of trade negotiations. [65979]

Mr. Wilson: The UK Government are strongly in favour of a broad-based new Round of trade negotiations in the World Trade Organisation, and has backed the European Commission's calls for a comprehensive approach. Decisions are to be taken on the scope and timing of these negotiations at the third WTO Ministerial Conference, which will be held in the United States in November this year.

Our objectives at this stage include further tariff reductions; reducing the burden on business and barriers to trade represented by industrial standards and technical regulations; opening up Government procurement markets in third countries; simplifying import and export procedures; ensuring proper enforcement of intellectual property rights around the world; seeking substantial progressive reduction in support and protection for agriculture and developing better regimes to cover issues such as food safety; deepening and broadening the liberalisation of trade in services; establishing a liberal, rules-based framework for international investment;

clarifying the interaction between environmental and trade policies to meet concerns that liberalisation should be pursued in a manner compatible with sustainable development; and clarifying the interaction between trade and competition issues. Throughout the Round we shall want to ensure that the interests of developing countries are taken into account and that every opportunity is taken to promote further engagement of the least developed countries.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to ensure full consultation with Parliament, relevant non-Governmental organisations and the public over developments in the proposed Millennium Round of trade negotiations. [65982]

Mr. Wilson: The Government have always consulted fully on major trade policy developments. The proposed Millennium Round of trade negotiations will not get underway until after the third WTO Ministerial Conference in November 1999. In preparation for and during these negotiations, the Government will consult with interested parties as we have in the past. The timetable for these consultations has not yet been finalised.

WALES

National Assembly

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to publish the consultation paper on the disqualification of persons from membership of the National Assembly for Wales under section 12 of the Government of Wales Act 1998. [66163]

Mr. Michael: The consultation referred to ran from 13 August to 2 October 1998. Views were invited on proposed offices and employment whose holders would be disqualified from also being members of the National Assembly by means of an Order-in-Council under section 12 of the 1998 Act.

I expect to put a draft of the Order before Parliament. It will be subject to affirmative resolution procedure in both Houses.

Wales European Centre

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will place a copy in the Library of the letter from the Head of European Division concerning the recent appointment of the Chief Executive of the Wales European Centre. [66878]

Mr. Michael: No. The head of the European Division is not a member of the Board of the Wales European Centre but attends as an observer. He was unable to attend the meeting of the Board at which the appointment of a new director was under consideration. He therefore sent a letter on a personal and confidential basis to the Secretary of the Board of the Wales European Centre. It was made quite clear that it did not present a view on behalf of my Department. The letter did not express a view on the proposed appointment but (a) conveyed points that had been raised with us by certain members of the wider partnership and (b) set out a number of questions which he suggested should be considered by the Board in deciding whether they should accept the recommendations of the appointments panel. I understand that each of these questions were fully considered by the Board in reaching a conclusion.

I am sure that my hon. Friend would be the first to criticise any official who failed to pass on pertinent views in this way or who failed to suggest questions to which such a Board should seek answers. That he did so strengthens the appointment procedure and public confidence that the Board sought to appoint the best person for the job, in the best interests of Wales.

The Wales European Centre is an independent body, headed by a Board which includes representatives of the partners who fund and support its work.

Neither I nor my officials will interfere with its work but I strongly support the Centre as a partner in promoting the people of Wales in Europe and for that reason I visited the Centre two weeks ago to discuss how best to cooperate and complement each other's work. I hope my hon. Friend and all Welsh members will join in this endeavour.

HEALTH

Psychotic Conditions

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to ensure that assessments of a patient's mental health, with particular reference to possible psychotic conditions, have excluded known genetic diseases which share the same symptoms. [R] [66148]

Mr. Hutton: The assessment of those presenting with mental health problems includes inquiries into family history of psychiatric and medical disorders.

Deafness (Early Diagnosis)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the benefits of early diagnosis of deafness to language acquisition. [66192]

Mr. Hutton: We are aware that early identification and intervention is vital for normal language development, and age at identification and consequent age at which a hearing aid is fitted have become important indicators of screening and service performance.

Most health authorities screen children who are at risk of permanent hearing impairment soon after birth. We are currently considering ways in which the screening system for children with hearing impairment can be improved and extended so that more children can be identified and treated earlier in life.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to promote the early diagnosis of deafness among children. [66191]

Mr. Hutton: A 1997 review commissioned by the health technology assessment programme suggested considering a system of universal neo-natal screening followed at seven months by a targeted screening using an infant distraction test. The National Screening Committee, through its sub-committee on child health screening, is now considering these suggestions for implementation across the National Health Service. Any proposed changes

to screening arrangements need to be considered very carefully to see whether they would be feasible and clinically cost effective. We do not expect the Committee to make a rushed decision on this important issue.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will implement a deafness screening programme for all children at birth. [66328]

Mr. Hutton: The National Screening Committee advises United Kingdom Health Ministers on all aspects of the introduction, modification or withdrawal of screening programmes. The Committee is currently considering the case for replacing the present infant distraction test with universal neonatal screening. We expect to receive advice later this year.

House Dust Mites

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the letter of 9 October 1998 (POH(6)5437/63) from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what assessment his Department has made of fabrics containing fungicide which kills house dust mites in new bedding materials. [65402]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans to make such an assessment.

Organ Preservation

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the letter of 1 December 1998 (POH(6)5437/66) to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what assessment he has made of Japanese research on organ preservation. [65409]

Mr. Hutton: The Japanese research is at too early a stage for making any meaningful assessments of its applicability to human transplantation. We are maintaining a close watching brief on its progress.

Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his replies of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *185*, if he will *(a)* list the latest figures for people waiting 12 months or more for hospital treatment in the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area and *(b)* the latest figures for people waiting (i) 13 to 25 weeks and (ii) 26 weeks or more to see a consultant in the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area. [66130]

Mr. Denham: 1,194 people were waiting 12 months or more for hospital treatment at the Mid Essex Hospital National Health Service Trust at the end of November 1998. The number of people waiting 13 to 25 weeks to see a consultant was 1,596 at the end of September 1998; the number of people waiting over 26 weeks was 341 at the end of September 1998.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to improve the inspection procedure for accommodation for asylum seekers *(a)* before the introduction of and *(b)* under the asylum seekers support scheme. [66714]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Home Office currently has no responsibility for the accommodation of asylum seekers (other than those held in detention). Asylum seekers who are currently in need of accommodation support receive such support from local authorities.

The new asylum seekers support scheme described in the White Paper, "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—a modern approach to immigration and asylum" (Cm 4018) is in the planning stage. It is too soon to indicate what plans we have for inspection of asylum seeker accommodation.

Adult Education (Section 11 Funding)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of section 11 funding in each of the participating local education authorities is currently used to support adult education; [66611]

(2) if he will list each local education authority currently using section 11 funding to support adult education; [66613]

(3) what proportion of section 11 funding is currently used to support adult education; [66612]

(4) what is the total amount of section 11 grant for the financial year 1998–99. [66614]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Section 11 grant funds projects in education and in other service areas including social services and housing. Total provision in the current financial year is £82.68 million. Projects with 118 local education authorities, as well as grant-maintained schools and colleges in the further education sector, cover a range of educational activity. Some local education authority projects principally concerned with other activities (eg English language support for school pupils whose first language is not English) include elements of adult education (eg family literacy work delivered through schools). Precise disaggregation of costs in such cases is difficult. The table lists local education authorities which have specific adult education projects; and shows, in relation to the 1998–99 financial year, the potential grant cost of these projects as a percentage of the total potential grant cost of the local education authority's section 11 projects. The potential grant cost of specific adult education projects in relation to the 1998–99 financial year represents 1.03 per cent. of the total potential grant cost of local education authorities' projects, and 0.95 per cent. of the total potential grant cost across the section 11 programme as a whole.

Local education authorities with specific adult education projects, showing the potential grant cost of these projects in relation to 1998–99 as a proportion of the total potential grant cost of the authority's projects

LEA	*Percentage*
Barking & Dagenham	4.17
Bolton	13.21
Brent	13.86
Bristol	1.79
Bromley	43.75
Croydon	6.51
Hillingdon	12.56
Kent	8.72

Local education authorities with specific adult education projects, showing the potential grant cost of these projects in relation to 1998–99 as a proportion of the total potential grant cost of the authority's projects

LEA	Percentage
Leeds	3.04
Leicester	1.19
Manchester	9.35
Norfolk	13.78
Peterborough[1]	4.26
Redbridge	4.34
Suffolk	5.44

[1] Most section 11-funded provision in Peterborough is covered by a project managed by Cambridgeshire, which pre-dated local government reorganisation. The table reflects the estimated potential grant cost of posts in Peterborough under that project.

Note:

In addition, some funding for adult education is currently paid under projects with further education colleges. In Birmingham, such funding would amount to 4.49 per cent. of the local education authority's funding if paid direct.

Common Market Referendum

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the material held by the Security Services relating to the 1975 referendum on United Kingdom membership of the Common Market. [66396]

Mr. Straw: It is for the Director General to decide which Security Service files should be released for public scrutiny, and to determine when they should be released. In reaching these decisions, he is bound by the relevant provisions of the Public Records Acts of 1958 and 1967, including the 30-year rule. In common with records belonging to other public bodies, Security Service records are released to the Public Record Office.

Life Sentences

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are currently serving life sentences *(a)* in total and *(b)* by category of offence for which sentenced. [66334]

Mr. George Howarth: The latest available information is for 30 November 1998. On that date, there were 4,011 life sentence prisoners (3,872 males and 139 females) in prisons in England and Wales. A breakdown by offence is given in the table.

Population of life sentence prisoners in prisons in England and Wales on 30 November 1998, by offence[1]

Offence	Number
Murder	3,241
Manslaughter	135
Other homicide and attempted homicide	87
Other violence against the person	82
Rape	250
Other sexual offences	28
Robbery	45
Arson	92
Other offences	51
Total	4,011

[1] Provisional figures

Feltham Young Offenders Unit

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* juveniles and *(b)* young offenders had been on remand at Feltham Young Offenders Unit for (i) two to four weeks, (ii) four to six weeks, and (iii) eight weeks or more, (1) currently and (2) between October 1997 and October 1998. [66397]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is given in the table. The latest available data are for November 1998.

Population of young offenders at HMP Feltham by length of time since first reception

Length of time since first remand into prison	Juveniles[1]	Young offenders[2]
30 November 1998[3]		
Up to 2 weeks	28	52
2 weeks up to 4 weeks	20	40
4 weeks up to 6 weeks	24	23
6 weeks up to 8 weeks	14	36
8 weeks or more	65	138
31 October 1998[3]		
Up to 2 weeks	37	45
2 weeks up to 4 weeks	23	58
4 weeks up to 6 weeks	18	25
6 weeks up to 8 weeks	10	22
8 weeks or more	60	150
31 October 1997		
Up to 2 weeks	23	40
2 weeks up to 4 weeks	24	42
4 weeks up to 6 weeks	9	26
6 weeks up to 8 weeks	4	23
8 weeks or more	55	155

[1] Persons aged 15–17 years
[2] Persons aged 18–20 years
[3] Provisional figures

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current staffing level at Feltham Young Offenders Unit; and if it is at full strength to cover all regimes. [66444]

Mr. George Howarth: The prison officer staffing complement at Feltham Young Offender Institution is 243. There were 242 prison officers in post as at 15 January 1999. Of these, 230 are operational, nine are undergoing prison officer initial training and three are suspended. There are six members of staff on long-term sick leave.

The health care department at Feltham is currently running seven health care officers/nurses short of complement; the gymnasium is two officers short of complement; and the industries and works departments are three instructors short of complement. In each case the regime has been affected. Steps are being taken to improve this situation; two officers are receiving training to become physical education officers and one additional instructor has been identified for works and industries.

The governor is conducting a recruitment exercise for officers and is implementing measures to reduce the number of staff on long-term sick leave.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reduce the length of time *(a)* young offenders and *(b)* juveniles spend on remand at Feltham Young Offenders Unit. [66391]

Mr. George Howarth: One of the Government's top priorities is faster and more efficient youth justice proceedings. One of our key manifesto commitments is to halve the time it takes to deal with persistent young offenders from arrest to sentence. In 1996, the average time taken was 142 days—the objective is to reduce this to 71 days. In the Public Service Agreements for the Home Office and the Criminal Justice System, the Government are committed to achieving a national average of 71 days by March 2002.

A range of measures have been introduced aimed at reducing delay in the youth justice system. The Home Office has prepared comprehensive best practice guidance on a range of issues—particularly the establishment of fast-tracking schemes in local areas. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 includes a whole range of measures to tackle delays—strengthening the ability of the courts to manage cases, and making procedural changes to ensure that unnecessary delays are avoided—we have just implemented some of these measures; others are being piloted.

More specifically, the Government's plans for ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place for remanded juveniles are being taken forward in the context of the wider programme of work arising from its review of all forms of secure accommodation for young offenders and young people held on remand or under sentence. The Government's aim is to implement provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 as soon as practicable, and by June 1999 at the latest, to allow the courts to remand directly to local authority secure accommodation 12–14 year olds, 15 and 16 year old girls and, where a place has been identified in advance, vulnerable 15 and 16 year old boys. The existing arrangements for remanding other 15 and 16 year old boys to Prison Service accommodation will continue for the time being, though the Government wish to move to a position where the practice of prison remands is no longer necessary.

In the meantime, work is being taken forward, with the Youth Justice Board, to improve the standard of care and quality of regimes for remanded and sentenced juveniles held in Prison Service accommodation to ensure that these are appropriate to the needs of young people. The Government are also making available funds, which will be administered by the Youth Justice Board, to develop local bail support provision to help ensure that custodial remands are used appropriately for the most serious and persistent cases.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the percentage of uniformed officers from ethnic minority communities at Feltham Young Offenders Unit. [66401]

Mr. George Howarth: There are currently 15 uniformed officers, 6 per cent. of the total, from ethnic minority communities employed at Feltham Young Offender Institution.

A local recruitment exercise is under-way and advertisements have been worded specifically to encourage applications from individuals from ethnic minority communities. Selection is always on merit.

The Prison Service has recently been reviewing levels of representation from the ethnic minorities and the opportunities it provides for its own ethnic minority staff. As at 1 January 1999, the Prison Service employed 1,246 members of staff, 3 per cent. of the total from the ethnic minorities. Proposals for action are being developed which will include the launch of a new national recruitment outreach strategy.

Prison Accommodation (Elderly Inmates)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what provisions he has made for the conversion of prison accommodation to suit an elderly prison population; [66441]

(2) what plans he has to authorise conversion of prisons or prison wings to cater for the needs of elderly inmates. [66434]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service meets the demands of elderly prisoners in the light of their particular circumstances and the facilities already available at the particular establishment where they are housed. At present, inmates over the age of 50 are held within the general prison population according to their legal status, security requirement and geographical location. This enables inmates to receive regular visits from professional advisers and maintain ties with their families. It also helps the Probation Service in their work to resettle offenders back into the community.

Kingston prison, Portsmouth, has a unit for elderly life sentenced prisoners, which was created in recognition of the increasing number of these prisoners. The Prison Service is keeping the position under consideration.

Prison Service (Recruitment)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about the Job Simulation Assessment Centre system of recruitment for the Prison Service. [66435]

Mr. George Howarth: In its recent annual report, the Board of Visitors of Feltham Young Offenders Institution asked the Home Secretary to look closely at the arrangements for the recruitment of prison officers, which they feel exacerbate local staffing problems.

Job simulation assessment centres form part of the new approach to the recruitment of prison officers. They have been developed to provide fairer, more objective and more reliable assessments of candidates than the recruitment process which they replaced.

The Prison Service is aware, however, of the difficulties being experienced at Feltham and elsewhere in recruiting suitable prison officers and other grades of staff. It is therefore carrying out a short review in order to identify ways in which the situation can be improved.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66211]

Mr. Straw: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate (Correspondence)

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what target he has set the Immigration and Nationality Directorate for replying to correspondence. [66233]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) has a target of 15 working days for replying to letters from hon. Members. This includes correspondence addressed to Ministers and addressed to the Secretary of the IND Board, to which IND officials reply. In addition, the Whitehall Service Standards operated across Government under the auspices of the Service First Initiative means IND has a target of 20 working days for replying to correspondence from members of the public which does not specifically relate to individual applications.

The hon. Member will be aware of recent notice given to Members of Parliament that moving offices and changing procedures in IND will cause delays in responding to correspondence for a few months. This is a temporary disruption, which should enable more efficient delivery against targets in the future.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Local Government Finance

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the dates and *(b)* the Minister in attendance, indicating whether (i) in person or (ii) by video link, for meetings requested by local authorities to discuss the local government grant settlement; and if he will list in each case the date his Department received the request for such a meeting from the local authority. [65432]

Ms Armstrong: The information requested is as follows:

Date	*Minister*	*Local authority or association*	*Video link/in person*	*Date request received from the local authority or association*
16 December	Hilary Armstrong	Lincolnshire	In person	8 December
21 December	Hilary Armstrong	Brighton & Hove	In person	10 December
21 December	Hilary Armstrong	Broxtowe	In person	14 December
21 December	Hilary Armstrong	Gedling	In person	7 December
21 December	Hilary Armstrong	Harrow	In person	8 December
21 December	Hilary Armstrong	Leicester City	In person	9 December
21 December	Hilary Armstrong	North Lincolnshire	In person	9 December
21 December	Alan Meale	Rutland	Video link	15 December
21 December	Hilary Armstrong	Worcestershire	In person	8 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	Birmingham	Video link	17 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	Bradford	In person	9 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	Brent	In person	8 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	Cambridgeshire	In person	9 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	Haringey	In person	17 December
22 December	Alan Meale	Havant	In person	10 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	Havering	In person	8 December
22 December	Alan Meale	Herefordshire	In person	14 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	Tyne & Wear FCD	Video link	8 December
22 December	Hilary Armstrong	West Sussex	Video link	7 December
22 December	Alan Meale	Wokingham	In person	8 December
4 January	Nick Raynsford	Castle Point	In person	16 December
4 January	Glenda Jackson	Derbyshire	Video link	30 December
4 January	Nick Raynsford	Northamptonshire	In person	21 December
4 January	Nick Raynsford	Nottinghamshire	In person	23 December
4 January	Glenda Jackson	Oldham	Video link	23 December
4 January	Nick Raynsford	Wansbeck	In person	18 December
5 January	Alan Meale	Buckinghamshire	In person	18 December
5 January	Nick Raynsford	County Councils Network	In person	17 December
5 January	Alan Meale	Devon	Video link	21 December
5 January	Nick Raynsford	East Riding of Yorkshire	In person	22 December
5 January	Alan Meale	Hertfordshire	Video link	21 December
5 January	Nick Raynsford	Lancashire	In person	11 December
5 January	Glenda Jackson	Mansfield	In person	16 December
5 January	Alan Meale	North East Lincolnshire	In person	21 December
5 January	Glenda Jackson	Northampton	In person	24 December
5 January	Glenda Jackson	Northumberland	In person	22 December
5 January	Alan Meale	Nuneaton & Bedworth	In person	21 December
5 January	Alan Meale	Plymouth	Video link	22 December
5 January	Nick Raynsford	Poole	In person	22 December
5 January	Alan Meale	Stroud	Video link	17 December
5 January	Alan Meale	Torbay	Video link	21 December
5 January	Nick Raynsford	Wandsworth	In person	24 December
5 January	Glenda Jackson	Windsor & Maidenhead	In person	23 December

Date	Minister	Local authority or association	Video link/in person	Date request received from the local authority or association
6 January	Nick Raynsford	Chesterfield	In person	24 December
6 January	Nick Raynsford	Kent	In person	17 December
6 January	Nick Raynsford	London FCD	In person	24 December
6 January	Nick Raynsford	North Kesteven	In person	18 December
6 January	Glenda Jackson	Norwich City	Phone	21 December
6 January	Glenda Jackson	Shropshire	In person	23 December
6 January	Nick Raynsford	Town and Country Finance Issues Group	In person	18 December
6 January	Glenda Jackson	Wigan	Video link	21 December
7 January	Alan Meale	Burnley	Video link	17 December
7 January	Alan Meale	Coventry	In person	3 December
7 January	Nick Raynsford	Cumbria	Video link	23 December
7 January	Nick Raynsford	Hackney	In person	23 December
7 January	Glenda Jackson	North East Derbyshire	In person	22 December
7 January	Nick Raynsford	Reigate & Banstead	In person	30 December
7 January	Nick Raynsford	Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities	In person	21 December
7 January	Alan Meale	South Gloucestershire	Video link	17 December
7 January	Alan Meale	Suffolk	Video link	11 December
7 January	Alan Meale	West Berkshire	In person	15 December
7 January	Nick Raynsford	West Midlands FCD	Video link	21 December
8 January	Glenda Jackson	Swindon	In person	5 January
11 January	Nick Raynsford	Bury	Video link	5 January
11 January	Nick Raynsford	Copeland	In person	23 December
11 January	Glenda Jackson	Derwentside	In person	22 December
11 January	Glenda Jackson	E8 Group	In person	29 December
11 January	Nick Raynsford	Harborough	In person	17 December
11 January	Glenda Jackson	Kingston upon Thames	Video link	5 January
11 January	Hilary Armstrong	Kirklees	In person	8 December
11 January	Alan Meale	Milton Keynes	In person	22 December
11 January	Nick Raynsfoed	North Somerset	In person	17 December
11 January	Lord Whitty	Stockport	Video link	5 January
12 January	Hilary Armstrong	North Yorkshire	In person	4 December
12 January	Hilary Armstrong	Oxfordshire	In person	16 December
12 January	Nick Raynsford	West Yorkshire FCD	In person	5 January
13 January	Hilary Armstrong	Association of London Government (ALG)	In person	n/a[1]
13 January	Hilary Armstrong	Local Government Association (LGA)	In person	n/a[1]

[1] Meetings with the LGA and the ALG followed a precedent set in the previous year and no separate request was required.

Rainham Marsh, Havering

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if English Partnerships has made any determination in respect of the suitability of land at Rainham Marsh in Havering for *(a)* development and *(b)* regeneration; and if he will place copies in the Library; [65900]

(2) if English Partnerships supports the amended planning application made by Havering Borough Council for development on a site of special scientific interest at Rainham Marsh in Havering; and if he will make a statement. [65903]

Mr. Meale: No determination has been made by English Partnerships as to their possible involvement in the generation or development of the Havering Riverside site (known as Rainham Marsh). The Havering Riverside site is entirely in the ownership of the London Borough of Havering and, being included within the Unitary Development Plan prepared in 1993 has been considered to be of strategic importance to employment generation within the Thames Gateway area. Any development must meet the requirements for nature conservation also set out in the UDP. English Partnerships is one of the partner organisations examining options for its possible development. English Partnerships supports the strategic commercial development of this site as far as it is in line with recommendations in the approved Unitary Development Plan.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons English Partnerships has made an application for planning permission on a site of special scientific interest at Rainham Marsh in Havering in identical terms to an application previously made by Havering Borough Council; and subsequently withdrew it. [65902]

Mr. Meale: Following LB Havering's initial outline planning application for development in January 1997, English Partnerships submitted a further identical application in November 1997 in an attempt to deal with the issue of securing benefits for the developing through a Section 106 Agreement. Clearly the Borough cannot submit such an application to itself; to assist the local authority, English Partnership, although in no way committed to this project, therefore became the applicant. That application has now been withdrawn in response to improvements embodied in the London Borough of Havering's amended scheme. The Council is in consultation with both English Nature, English Heritage and other environmental groups, on the environmental implications of the application proposals. All parties are

now collaborating to prepare a full environment impact assessment in an attempt to reconcile the competing interests on the site.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what powers English Partnerships possesses to *(a)* make and *(b)* support planning applications on land in respect of which he has not given directions or consent as to its suitability for *(a)* regeneration and *(b)* development; [65904]

(2) what *(a)* directions and *(b)* consents have been given to English Partnerships relating to the possible (i) regeneration and (ii) development of Rainham Marsh; and if he will place copies in the Library. [65899]

Mr. Meale: The powers of English Partnerships, contained in the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993 are directed at its main statutory objective of securing the regeneration of land, across England, which is contaminated, derelict, vacant, unused or likely to become so. In pursuit of this objective the Agency can acquire, hold, manage, reclaim, improve and dispose of land, plant machinery, equipment and other property; give financial assistance to other persons (including for use on environmental improvements); and generally do anything necessary or expedient for the purposes of its objects or for purposes incidental to those purposes. Section 167 of the Act provides for the Secretary of State to issue guidance or directions. Guidance was issued to English Partnerships in April 1994 on which land is suitable for regeneration or development or how it is to exercise its functions. No guidance or directions have been issued since that time, and no guidance, directions or consents have been issued with respect to Rainham Marshes. English Partnerships is free to make planning applications on the same basis as any other applicant.

Countryside (Public Access)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *539–40*, if he will make a statement on the way in which the Government will take into account future financial settlements with regards to the increased costs to local authorities of increased public access to the countryside. [66057]

Ms Armstrong: We shall be consulting further with the Local Government Association on the financial implications for local authorities of our proposals for increasing public access to the countryside. The need for revenue expenditure by local authorities will be taken into account, along with other spending pressures and the scope for efficiencies, in a future local government finance settlement.

Jubilee Line Extension

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his Department's current estimate for the *(a)* completion and *(b)* commissioning of the Jubilee Line Extension. [66639]

Dr. Reid: London Transport plan to open the Jubilee Line Extension in three phases (firstly Stratford to North Greenwich, then on to Waterloo and finally to Green Park and connection with the existing Jubilee Line). Commissioning will thus overlap with the final completion of the construction and fitting out work. Commissioning work is already in hand. London Transport aims to have all three phases commissioned and in operation by the autumn.

Barrage Schemes

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the country's estuaries *(a)* have been and *(b)* are currently being investigated for barrage schemes. [66371]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not kept centrally.

A large number of estuaries have been investigated to varying levels of detail in connection with flood protection, tidal power generation and for amenity purposes. However, many of these have not been and are unlikely to be taken forward. Some examples are indicated in the following table but this is by no means comprehensive.

Location	*Barrage type*	*Status*
Hull	Flood surge	Built
Breydon Water (Norfolk)	Flood surge	Under investigation
River Colne (Essex)	Flood surge	Built
Thames	Flood surge	Built
River Truro (Cornwall)	Flood surge	Built
River Hayle (Cornwall)	Flood surge/amenity	Built
Swansea	Amenity	Built
Cardiff Bay	Amenity	Under construction
River Usk (Newport)	Amenity	Proposed
Tees	Amenity	Built
River Adur (West Sussex)	Amenity	Proposed
Severn	Tidal power	Proposed
Mersey	Tidal power	Proposed
Duddon (Cumbria)	Road barrage	Proposed
The Wash	Water supply	Proposed
Morecambe Bay	Water supply	Proposed

Contaminated Metals

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information he has received since May 1997 from *(a)* the Environment Agency and *(b)* Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, concerning interception of illegally imported radioactively contaminated metals; and what arrangements are in place to stop the recycling of imported contaminated metals. [66430]

Mr. Meale: Reports of such incidents are received from the Radioactive Substances Sub-Group of the UK Interpol Environment Crime Group. Since April 1997 we have received information about 5 incidents involving the interception of illegally imported radioactive contaminated metals.

Imports of radioactively contaminated materials into the UK are regulated by the Environment Agency (EA) in England and Wales and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) in Scotland, under the Transfrontier Shipment of Radioactive Waste Regulations 1993 and Council Regulation 1493/93 on shipments of radioactive substances between Member States. The reuse or recycling of such materials is regulated by EA and SEPA under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993.

Wind Farms

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to ensure that the benefits of wind power in terms of pollution are given greater weight by planning inspectors when considering planning applications for wind-farms. [66329]

Mr. Raynsford: Inspectors must give appropriate weight to all material planning considerations when considering wind-farm proposals on a case by case basis.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many wind-farm projects have been refused planning permission in each of the last five years; [66226]

(2) how many wind energy projects have been built in the last three years. [66227]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not held by the Department and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Most planning applications are dealt with by local planning authorities.

Water and Sewerage Companies

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will meet the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health to discuss its proposal that the Water Industry Act 1991 be amended to place a duty on water companies and OFWAT to operate in such a way as to protect public health and the environment. [66556]

Mr. Meale: The Government are deeply committed to protecting both the environment and public health. However, the Water Industry Act 1991 already places the Director General under a duty to consider the environment when formulating or considering any proposal relating to water companies' functions. In the context of the current review of utility regulation, we intend to strengthen this so that the Director General will be under a statutory duty to have regard to statutory guidance on social and environmental objectives in the exercise of his statutory functions.

The 1991 Act also places a number of duties on the water and sewerage undertakers, and the protection of public health is at the core of these duties. The Water Industry Bill will further protect public health by removing water companies' ability to disconnect people's homes in the event of non-bill payment. There are therefore already clear duties on both the Director General and the water companies to take account of public health and the environment. Apart from strengthening the duties on the Director General through the utility regulation review, I do not see a need for further duties.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what method is used by OFWAT to determine the adequacy of investment in the sewerage network by the water and sewerage companies; and if he will make a statement. [66558]

Mr. Meale: Ofwat's approach to assessing the adequacy of capital maintenance expenditure on the sewerage network is to consider trends in the serviceability of assets to customers and to the environment and, if appropriate, allow for the expenditure levels to be adjusted at the next price review.

In "Raising the Quality" (September 1998) we published guidance to the Director General of Water Services which suggested that sewerage companies should take a strategic approach to the maintenance of their sewerage assets by, for example, developing an assessment system similar to the one already used for water supply.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those water and sewerage companies which have met their targets on flooding from sewers and collapses *(a)* between 1990 and 1995 and *(b)* since 1995. [66359]

Mr. Meale: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 19 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *441–42*, in response to a Question from the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake).

Marine Pollution

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 12 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *187*, if his reference to historic levels relates to pre-1998 levels; and if it is his intention to reduce concentrations under paragraph 15 of the Sintra statement to pre-1998 levels by 2020. [66560]

Mr. Meale: The UK is working with the other OSPAR Contracting Parties to establish a common understanding of "historic levels" and how these levels will relate to Member States' obligations under the Radioactive Substances Strategy agreed at Sintra. The UK will fully meet its international obligations agreed at Sintra and elsewhere.

Docklands Light Railway

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide a report on the progress of Docklands Light Railway Limited. [67025]

Mr. Caborn: I have today placed in the Library of the House the Docklands Light Railway Limited's (DLR Ltd) Annual Report and Accounts for 1997–98.

The railway continues to make excellent progress. Passenger numbers increased from 17 million to 23 million during the year and continue to grow. Excellent progress is being made on the extension of the railway to Lewisham and it is expected to be operational in time for the Millennium. DLR Ltd., now directly owned by the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions, assumed its new role as a holding company, with effect from 6 April 1997 and successfully franchised the railway's operation and maintenance to the private sector.

Atmospheric Tests (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will give details of *(a)* the atmospheric-tests which have been

carried out by his Department in Crosby, *(b)* the test results and *(c)* the action which is being considered as a result; and if he will make a statement. [66709]

Mr. Meale: There are four Nitrogent Dioxide (NO_2) Diffusion Tube Network sites in or near Crosby.

Site name	*Site address*	*Grid reference East*	*West*
Crosby 1N	39 Crosby Road North, Waterloo	3322	3985
Crosby 2N	Sycamore Road, Waterloo	3322	3986
Crosby 3N	39 Elton Avenue, Waterloo	3314	3999
Bootle 2N	23 Norman Road, Bootle	3345	3971

A summary of the monthly NO_2 concentrations for these sites, for calendar year 1997, is as follows. Concentrations are given in parts per billion by volume (ppb).

Monthy summary of nitrogen dioxide concentrations 1997
Number of exceedences and maximum for each month

	Site name Crosby 1N Location K	Crosby 2N Location I	Crosby 3N Location B	Crosby 2N Location B
January	43	36	—	34
February	24	14	15	22
March	35	18	15	23
April	33	22	19	20
May	32	21	14	16
June	36	17	13	15
July	27	12	7	13
August	29	20	11	14
September	26	20	14	20
October	35	25	19	26
November	44	32	28	36
December	34	23	—	26

UK Smoke and SO_2 Network

Suspended particulate matter (as black smoke) and sulphur dioxide (as total acidity) are measured at one site in Crosby, CROSBY 3 situated at Merchant Taylor's School, Liverpool Road. The site is part of the UK Smoke and SO_2 Monitoring network and has been in operation since 1979. It is in a predominantly residential (suburban) area. Mean concentrations of SO_2 and smoke at this site for the year April 1997-March 1998 were $8Tgm^{-3}$ for smoke (British Standard calibration) and $18Tgm^{-3}$ for SO_2. These values are below the UK means for the same period, which were $9Tgm^{-3}$ and $21Tgm^{-3}$ for smoke and SO_2 respectively, based on the whole network. A summary of the statistics for this period is as presented.

Code	*85503*
Site name	Crosby 3
Region	North-West
Authority	Sefton
Grid reference	
East	3321
North	3990
Summary of smoke data 1997–98	
Valid days	49
Max. gap	15
Arith. mean	8
Median	5
98th percentile	35
Max. day	84

Code	*85503*
Site name	Crosby 3
Region	North-West
Authority	Sefton
Grid reference	
East	3321
North	3990
Summary of SO_2 data 1997–98	
Valid days	349
Max. gap	15
Arith. mean	18
Median	20
98th percentile	40
Max. day	68

Abbreviations:
"Valid Days" denotes the number of valid days data obtained for the year.
"Max. Gap" is the maximum number of consecutive days for which no valid value was obtained.
"Arith.mean" is the arithmetic mean of all daily values.
"Median
"98th percentile" is the 98th percentile for all daily values.
"Max. Day" is the maximum daily value measured during the year.
Further information and daily data up to September 1998, can be obtained via the World Wide Web, at DETR's Air Quality Archive at http://www.environment.detr.gov.uk/airq/aqinfo.htm.

The Government's policies with respect to improving air quality in the UK were published on 13 January, in the "Report of the Review of the National Air Quality Strategy". Copies of the report have been placed in the Library of the House.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the *(a)* costs to date and *(b)* projected costs to the public purse of work associated with the Birmingham Northern Relief Road, including (i) land purchase, (ii) legal costs and (iii) policing costs; and what contribution to these costs will be made by Midland Expressway Ltd. [66414]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* Under the Concession Agreement with Midland Expressway Limited (MEL) the costs and risks of constructing the Birmingham Northern Relief Road (BNRR) and its link roads fall to MEL, though certain non-works costs involved in promoting a private finance scheme fall to the Government.

The total cost to date of selecting the private sector promoter, negotiating the Concession Agreement and contributing to the statutory Order-making process is estimated at £9.8 million, of which £1 million is attributable to legal advice. Land acquisition and management costs are recoverable from the concessionaire. Policing costs are a matter for the Police Authority and the Home Office.

Projected costs to the public purse associated with the BNRR include a contribution towards the reconstruction of the existing M42 near Water Orton to enable its use by BNRR traffic. Under the concession agreement the major part of the cost of this work is to be met by MEL, but the Department is to contribute a share currently estimated at £20 million. This takes into account that much of the traffic on that section will not use the BNRR.

Further costs to the public purse could result from any changes imposed by the Department to the requirements of the concession agreement, for example, changes

reflecting revised engineering standards. Any imposed changes which involve extra costs to the Concessionaire have to be paid for by the Secretary of State. The present estimate of the agreed changes is a maximum of £1.5 million.

In addition to these costs, about £11.4 million in the period until June 1991 was spent on the earlier proposals for a publicly financed Birmingham Northern Relief Road.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will have the power to insist on minimum staffing levels for the reorganised National Air Traffic Services. [66863]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend has no plans to take powers to set either minimum or maximum staffing levels for NATS. Except where safety regulations prescribe minimum staffing levels, it will—as now—be for NATS' management to determine the staffing levels the company needs to discharge its obligations.

Fair Rents

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to limit increases in registered fair rents; and if he will make a statement. [66937]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 13 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *216–17*.

Housing

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the current tabulation of the distribution of the SAP rating of the housing stock. [66885]

Mr. Raynsford: Details of the distribution of SAP ratings in the housing stock will be included in an energy report of the 1996 English House Condition Survey due for publication this spring.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to consult on a best value framework for housing as announced in his statement on Housing and Regeneration Policy on 22 July 1998. [67438]

Ms Armstrong: We are today publishing a consultation paper, "Best Value in Housing Framework", allowing until 16 April 1999 for comments. Best value is a central part of the Government's agenda for modernising local government. Its application to housing, as one of the key functions undertaken by local authorities, is therefore of prime importance. Under the provisions in Part I of the Local Government Bill, currently before Parliament, local authorities will have to set, in consultation with tenants and others, tough targets for their investment programmes and for the quality of their service delivery. They will be judged by their performance. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 11 June 1998 a new Housing Inspectorate, under the auspices of the Audit Commission, will be established which will monitor their performance.

The consultation paper explains the framework within which local housing authorities will need to operate in obtaining best value in housing. It takes account of key housing issues such as the relationship between best value and the housing investment programme process; the role of tenants and residents; the read across to registered social landlords; and principles around the operation and establishment of the Housing Inspectorate. I have placed copies of the consultation paper in the Libraries of both Houses.

Private Rental Deposits

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *306*, concerning rental deposits, if a date has been set for the meeting with Ministers; and how its conclusions will be reported to hon. Members. [66883]

Mr. Raynsford: My officials have had constructive initial meetings with the organisations representing landlords, agents and tenants. In the light of these discussions, some of the organisations have asked to consult their members further. A date for the meeting with Ministers will be fixed very shortly, when these further discussions have taken place. I cannot say at this stage how or when I will report conclusions back to hon. Members.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to letters of 15 December 1997 (EE/P50/17203/97) and of 9 June (EE/P50/9738/98) to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what action has been taken as a result of the Environment Agency's report on its research using earthworms as indicator organisms of contaminated land. [65403]

Mr. Meale: Results from the study highlighted the need for further chemical analysis of the soils and earthworms to enable the biological and chemical data to be fully understood. The analytical work was completed in mid-December and is currently being evaluated and interpreted. A final report is expected in March 1999.

Transport Planners

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the letter of 17 July 1998 (R/J/P50/8480/98/98) to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what progress has been made in developing a gender audit to assist transport planners. [65405]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Transport Studies Unit at the University of East London has been commissioned to produce the gender audit to assist transport planners and operators. The audit is due to be finalised in the summer of this year. As part of the development of the audit, there will be a number of focus groups with professionals, users and transport providers, and the Unit is creating a website to aid the exchange of ideas and information on what women's public transport needs are and how they can be met. A Steering Group will shortly be convening to discuss progress of the audit.

Air Transport Users Council

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funding is provided to the Air Transport Users Council from public bodies; and if he will list those bodies. [66827]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Air Transport Users Council is entirely funded by the Civil Aviation Authority which operates on a commercial basis receiving its income from airlines' fees and services provided to other bodies including the Government. The Council does not receive any public funds.

Air Travel

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which Department has responsibility for monitoring the Warsaw Convention as it relates to air travel. [66826]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Responsibility for the monitoring of the Warsaw Convention rests with the International Civil Aviation Organisation. My Department has responsibility for policy matters relating to the Convention and the implementation of it in United Kingdom legislation. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is responsible for the signature and ratification of new instruments and, when new instruments enter into force, is the recipient of formal communications from the Government of Poland.

Traffic Congestion

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the cost to British industry of traffic congestion. [65218]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Last year's White Paper on the Future of Transport explained, as background to the new policy framework set out in that White Paper, that traffic congestion is costing the economy billions of pounds every year, and that traffic forecasts based on pre-White Paper policies pointed to more congestion and increasing costs. As mentioned in para. 1.7 of the White Paper, published estimates of the costs include the CBI's of £15 billion per annum, and National Economic Research Associates' of £7 billion per annum.

Biotechnology

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has *(a)* conducted and *(b)* commissioned into the possibility of biotechnology causing irreversible contamination of the ecosystem. [66679]

Mr. Meacher: The Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has an ongoing research programme to assess the risk and potential impact of genetically modified (GM) organisms on the environment:

(a) Research conducted and reports published by the DETR

i. GM Crops and their Wild Relatives—a UK Perspective

ii. Genetic Modification of Fish—a UK Perspective

iii. Dispersal of GM Microorganisms by Abiotic Factors and Soil Invertebrates

iv. Risk Assessment and the Release of GM Microorganisms into the Pylloplane

v. Risk Assessment and the Release of GM Microorganisms into the Rhizosphere

vi. Risk Assessment and the Release of GM Microorganisms into the Environment

vii. Gene Flow in Natural Populations of Brassica and Beta

viii. Selectable Marker Genes in GM Organisms

Research conducted and awaiting publication by the DETR

i. Environmental Impact of GM Crops

ii. Safety of Plant Viral Inserts

iii. Investigation of Feral Oilseed Rape Populations

iv. Review of GM Bioinsecticides

v. Review of Parasitic Nematodes for Biological Control of Invertebrates

(b) Research commissioned by the DETR and ongoing

i. Environmental Impact of Insect Resistance in GM Plants

ii. Impact of Multiple Tolerance in GM Plants

iii. Environmental Impact of Disease Resistance in GM Plants

iv. Assessment of the Biocontainment of GM Microorganisms in a Model Ecosystem

v. Monitoring Large Scale Releases of GM Plants.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the potential for biotechnology to produce herbicide resistant weeds. [66683]

Mr. Meacher: All applications for the release of plants genetically modified for herbicide tolerance are accompanied by a risk assessment that considers the potential for the herbicide tolerant crop to become a persistent weed or for it to cross-pollinate wild relatives and produce herbicide tolerant hybrids. The Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) considers these applications on a case by case basis and advises the Government on the likelihood that herbicide tolerant weeks will result from the release of the genetically modified plant.

My Department also funds research into the potential of biotechnology to create herbicide tolerant weeds. Completed and current projects are as listed:

(i) GM Crops and their Wild Relatives—a UK Perspective

(ii) Gene Flow in Natural Populations of *Brassica* and *Beta*

(iii) Environmental Impact of GM Crops

(iv) Investigation of Feral Oilseed Rape Populations

(v) Impact of Multiple Tolerance in GM Plants

(vi) Monitoring Large Scale Releases of GM Plants.

Car Travel

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates he has received of the average number of miles driven by a non-company car driver in each of the last five years *(a)* in the course of work, *(b)* for travel from home to work and *(c)* for other reasons. [66912]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The average number of miles driven in a non-company car in each of the last five years is:

Average annual vehicle mileage of non-company cars by year and by journey purpose: 1993–97

Miles

Year	*In the course of work*	*Travel from home to work*	*Other mileage*	*Total mileage*
1993	924	2,468	5,065	8,475
1994	903	2,459	5,260	8,623
1995	874	2,428	5,094	8,396
1996	861	2,446	5,071	8,378
1997	760	2,468	4,989	8,217
1995–97	832	2,447	5,052	8,331

Source:
National Travel Survey

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the average number of miles driven by a company car driver each year *(a)* in the course of work and *(b)* not in the course of work. [66910]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The average number of miles driven in a company car each year during the period 1995–97 *(a)* in the course of work is 11,380 miles, and *(b)* not in the course of work is 11,230 miles.

Source:
National Travel Survey.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has *(a)* to reduce the number of discretionary journeys made in company cars not in the course of work and *(b)* to reform the system of allowances for business-related journeys. [66911]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", contains a wide range of proposals to encourage more sustainable car use, many of which should help to reduce private mileage in company cars. More specifically, the Government are committed to increasing the taxation on free fuel provided by companies for private motoring annually by 20 per cent. above usual pump price increases over the next five years, to discourage its provision. The Inland Revenue is also continuing to review how the company car taxation regime, covering both business and private mileage, might be structured to send better environmental signals.

Gosport Marina

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors underlie the timescale for issuing a section 34 consent under the Coastal Protection Act 1949 to The Gosport Marina Limited in respect of its proposed redevelopment and construction of a 400 m section of the Millennium Promenade at Gosport. [66882]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Before granting his consent under the Coastal Protection Act 1949 my right hon. Friend has to consider any objections to the proposed works made on the ground of whether obstruction or danger to navigation is likely to result. In addition, Regulation 48 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations 1994 requires him to determine whether the plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on a European site for nature conservation. In respect of the proposals submitted by The Gosport Marina Limited we are currently considering the submissions made by objectors and advice in respect of the likely impact on the Portsmouth Harbour Special Protection Area.

Local Government and Public Policy

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the research his Department has commissioned on cross-cutting issues relating to local government and public policy. [67439]

Ms Armstrong: Today, I am publishing two reports looking at how effective joint working, at both central and local levels, is at tackling a number of serious issues facing society today. These issues, like social exclusion, community safety, disaffected youth and sustainable development, cut across Government Departments.

We need to know how we can improve the design and delivery of policies aimed at tackling these issues and we need to shift the emphasis from attempting to solve problems to preventing them. The two reports contain lessons from the experience of joint working and advice about future co-operation in working towards agreed outcomes.

The research encourages everybody to look beyond short term, single issue approaches using a number of separate agencies to a more coherent, unified approach setting these issues in the widest possible context.

This joined-up approach is not only more desirable, but has already proved to be more effective in emerging policies like Health Action Zones and the Best Value pilots in my own specific area of responsibility, local government.

Darwin Advisory Committee

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the forthcoming financial management and policy review of the Darwin Advisory Committee. [67552]

Mr. Meacher: As part of the Government's programme of regular five-yearly financial, management and policy reviews of non-departmental public bodies my Department will conduct a thorough review of the Darwin Advisory Committee. The first stage of the review will take the form of a "prior options" study. This will assess the extent to which the Darwin Advisory Committee functions are necessary for the achievement of the Government's policies, and whether there is scope for contracting out or transferring all or part of its functions to another body.

The progress made by the Darwin Advisory Committee since it was set up will be examined and the results of that examination and of the prior options study will inform a detailed review of the Darwin Advisory Committee's policy and financial management systems.

I expect the reviews to last about 6–8 weeks. In carrying out the study my Department will consult widely with those who have an interest in the Committee's work.

Tenant Participation Compacts

Lorna Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish the consultation paper on local authority tenant participation compacts. [67597]

Ms Armstrong: The Government's proposals for increasing tenant involvement in the management of local authority housing will be published in the consultation paper, "Tenant Participation Compacts" on 25 January 1999. The proposals link with the proposals contained in the consultation paper "Best Value in Housing Framework", which are being published today and on which I have made a separate announcement.

The consultation period will end on 31 March 1999 and a further announcement on the proposals will be made in May. I am arranging for copies of the consultation paper to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Special Advisers

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62845]

Mr. Nick Brown: The two Special Advisers in my Department are: Mr. Kieran Simpson and Mr. Tom Greatrex. I am advised by the Department that they both have the level of security clearance appropriate to the matters with which they deal. The areas of MAFF responsibilities with which they respectively deal are set out below:

Mr. Simpson

- Agricultural Policy and the CAP
- Countryside and Rural Policy Issues
- Agricultural and Horticultural Commodities Production
- Forestry
- Pesticide Safety, Veterinary Medicines, Plant Health
- Research and Science
- Animal Welfare
- Departmental Administration and Establishment Issues

Mr. Greatrex

- Fisheries
- External Trade
- Food and Drinks Industry Competition Issues
- Export Promotion
- Food Safety and Standards; Meat Hygiene
- Animal Health (including BSE)
- Flood Defence.

Fishing Industry Initiatives

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which of the changes referred to in his New Year message to fishermen were initiatives from the industry itself. [66407]

Mr. Morley: Changes in a number of areas were prompted by concerns put forward from within the fishing industry. These included the introduction of fixed quota allocations, action to link the registration and licensing of fishing vessels to the declaration of maximum continuous or permanently derated engine power, restrictive licensing for scallop dredging and measures to assist the replacement or introduction of pelagic freezer trawlers. Additionally, changes were made to EU rules to increase the selectivity of fishing gear, to increase the minimum landing sizes of shellfish and to extend the quota system to additional species of fish in the North Sea.

BSE

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to test randomly the brains of slaughtered dairy cows for BSE. [66503]

Mr. Rooker: A study of brain tissue from cattle slaughtered in the Over Thirty Months Scheme was started on 4 January 1999. The aim is to collect, by the end of March, samples from 4,000 animals. The brain samples will be tested for the presence of abnormal prion protein (PrP^{Sc}) by two or more of the recently developed diagnostic tests, and also studied by histopathology for evidence of vacuolation. In compliance with a recommendation from SEAC, the study is being confined, in so far as is possible, to animals 5 years of age or over. 5 years is the average incubation period of BSE and PrP^{Sc} has been detected in brain tissue only quite late in the BSE incubation period.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what methods are available to confirm the diagnosis of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy using brain materials from slaughtered animals. [66499]

Mr. Rooker: At the moment, all diagnostic tests for BSE using brain tissue rely upon the infectious agent having reached the central nervous system. Current evidence indicates that this event occurs late in the incubation period, shortly before clinical onset. Any diagnostic test applied earlier in the incubation period is therefore likely to produce a negative result, even if the animal is infected. Once infectivity has reached the central nervous system, several diagnostic options are theoretically possible although none will be absolute. In other words, there may be some false negative results and interpretation of positive results is still open to question, given that some of the available tests have not been fully validated. The options available include mouse inoculation, which could take up to three years to give a result; histopathological examination of the brain stem; extraction of "scrapie-associated fibrils"; or one of a range of immunologically based tests for the detection of abnormal prion protein. None of the latter have been fully validated as yet.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the percentage of suspected BSE cases that have been subsequently confirmed in each year from 1988 to 1998. [66504]

Mr. Rooker: Of the cases placed under restriction in each calendar year and subsequently slaughtered, the following percentages were confirmed:

Percentage

Year of restriction	*Confirmation rate for suspected BSE cases*
1988	91.92
1989	88.54
1990	85.22
1991	86.24
1992	85.00
1993	83.66
1994	83.40
1995	83.36
1996	78.95
1997	81.30
1998	[1]77.16

[1] The 1998 figure is provisional; some results are still pending. It is unlikely that the full figures for 1998 will be available before the end of May 1999.

Note:
Data as at 8 January 1999

Consultation (Farmers)

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library full copies of the responses received to the Government's current consultation process with farmers, with the analysis carried out of the responses by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [66365]

Mr. Nick Brown: Farmers in England are being asked for their views on the implementation of proposals to reform the Common Agricultural Policy. Over 175,000 questionnaires have been sent out to farmers in England, asking them to indicate, by placing a tick in the appropriate box, whether they agree or disagree with options. Equivalent consultation exercises are being undertaken in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although it would not be meaningful to place copies of all individual returned questionnaires in the Library, summaries and analyses of the returned questionnaires will be deposited in the Library at intervals.

Pesticides

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what funding will be available for the Integrated Farming Initiative to limit the use of pesticides. [66590]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The Department is committed to the encouragement of integrated farming and has spent over £1 million on research in this area in recent years, much of it through the LINK programme. The findings of this research were featured in a conference sponsored by MAFF in October 1998. Careful management of pesticide use is only one element of integrated farming and it would not be appropriate to single this out for dedicated funding.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what consultations have taken place with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions concerning the implementation of a pesticide tax. [66591]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* Extensive study of the issues surrounding the introduction of a possible pesticide tax has been carried out by ECOTEC Research & Consulting on behalf of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. An interdepartmental group of officials, including those from my own Department, oversaw the conduct of this research. Ministers have not so far discussed the consultant's conclusions.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 18 to 19 January; and if he will make a statement. [67011]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of the EU Agriculture Council in Brussels on 18 and 19 January 1999.

The German Presidency informed the Agriculture Council of the work programme for the coming six months, of which the principal focus would be completion of the negotiation for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the framework of Agenda 2000. In addition, the Presidency made it clear that the Council would discuss proposals on the annual CAP price fixing, animal welfare, consumer protection and organic livestock standards.

The Council resumed its discussions of the Agenda 2000 CAP reform proposals by conducting an in-depth debate on reform of the beef and milk sectors. On behalf of the UK, I supported the Commission's proposal to reduce prices and abolish intervention buying in the beef sector, though with appropriate arrangements to safeguard the systems of extensively-reared beef production which is characteristic of the UK. On reform of the milk sector, I pressed the case for a more thorough-going reform than that proposed by the Commission, referring specifically to the proposal made by the United Kingdom, Denmark, Italy and Sweden for reform in this sector which would lead to the eventual abolition of milk quotas.

The German Presidency outlined a programme of work on the CAP aspects of Agenda 2000, leading up to the meeting of the Agriculture Council beginning on 22 February. They indicated their intention to try to draw the negotiation to a conclusion at that Council in view of the timetable laid down by Heads of Government in Cardiff and in Vienna for completion of the whole package of measures by the end of March 1999. I welcomed their commitment to reaching early agreement on these proposals.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what has been the total expenditure and the

breakdown of expenditure in the Cabinet Office since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising, *(c)* direct mail and *(d)* publicity. [64186]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[pursuant to his reply, 11 January 1999, c. 93]:* I regret that a previous reply was incomplete in respect of amounts spent by the Cabinet Office since May 1997 on public opinion research. The amount showed £481,200 when it should have read £750,108 the expenditure on television, radio and newspaper advertising, £220,164; on direct mail, £794,319; and on publicity, £1,158,469 remain unchanged. All figures are net of recoverable VAT.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Jury Deliberations

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to permit licensed jury deliberation research. [66693]

Mr. Hoon: The Government have no plans to amend section 8 of the Contempt of Court Act 1981, which effectively bars research into how a jury has conducted its deliberations. It is possible to conduct research into certain other aspects of the jury system without contravening the Contempt of Court Act. Any proposals received by the Government for such research are considered individually.

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Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Com = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, res = resolution, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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